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‘ALL JOB’S STOCK OF ASSES’:
THE FICTION OF LAURENCE STERNE
AND THE THEODICY DEBATE

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE,

JUNE 2010

BY

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Sterne's fiction is an ambiguous representation with religious and libidinal subtexts of a struggle to give a coherent metaphysical account both of the significance of compassion for suffering and of causality. This implies that Sterne's fiction cannot be fully understood without reference to eighteenth-century arguments about the compatibility of belief in the power and goodness of God with the existence of evil otherwise known as the theodicy debate. This becomes clear when analysed with Slavoj Žižek's concept of the fetish: the lie which enables one to live with an unendurable truth.

The thesis is organised into six chapters. After setting Sterne's fiction in the context of contemporaneous theodicies, these examine in turn its theodictic features, its narrative procedures, its representations of mortality and class hierarchy, and its relationship to Sentimentalism. It shows that in each of these areas two of the major themes of contemporaneous theodicies are also fetishised subtexts in Sterne's fiction: the religious attachment to the Newtonian idea of a perfectly ordered cosmos and the anxiety that the unmanaged appetite for pleasure might provoke divine displeasure.

An array of concepts from Žižek identify the theodictic implications of the fictions — the author as the omniscient 'subject supposed to know'; the 'Master-Signifier' that is meant to define the narrator's role but fails because of a repressed remainder that it cannot encompass; the mechanisms by which subjects interpret experiences as messages from the divine; the idea of language as a reality that can outlive the subject; and the theory that the prospect of rational social order can be psychologically unendurable.

Sterne's fiction highlights the fact that fiction often trades on the reader's need for comprehensible patterns of causality: its refusal to provide this is theodictic and this fact has hitherto received no extended critical attention.

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List of abbreviations used in this thesis

<i>BJECs</i>	<i>British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>ECentF</i>	<i>Eighteenth-Century Fiction</i>
<i>ECL</i>	<i>Eighteenth-Century Life</i>
<i>ECr</i>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
<i>ECS</i>	<i>Eighteenth Century Studies</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>ELN</i>	<i>English Language Notes</i>
<i>JECs</i>	<i>Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>NLH</i>	<i>New Literary History</i>
<i>NQ</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>The Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>StN</i>	<i>Studies in the Novel</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
<i>TShan</i>	<i>The Shandean</i>

Introduction

My central thesis is that it is not possible to give a full, critical account of Sterne's fiction without positioning it in relation to the theodicy debate and that the truth of this becomes clearer when Slavoj Žižek's concept of *fetishism* is used to analyse the data. I argue that the theodicy debate constitutes a highly significant influence on Sterne's fiction and that the relationship between the two has not hitherto been adequately examined.

The literary critical elucidation of Sterne's fiction is dominated by a variety of themes. Aside from the scholarly tasks of illuminating its borrowings and its obscure allusions, some significant critical work has crystallised around certain key preoccupations — whether it is archaic, or modish, or postmodern *avant la lettre*, whether it is misogynist, or reactionary, or progressive.¹ Some fertile lines of enquiry have

¹ There is a fairly well established polarity between the approach following Douglas Jefferson's line that focuses on Sterne's fiction as the expression of an archaic literary tradition and John Traugott's line that characterises it as anticipatory of the modern novel (D. W. Jefferson, 'Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit', in *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Traugott (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), pp. 148–67). Traugott argues that, 'We [moderns] really can claim him, not because of our imaginative superiority but because Sterne was an inexplicable anachronism' (Traugott, 'Introduction' to *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 1). Recent examples of this latter approach include Patricia Meyer Spacks when she says that Sterne's fiction 'alone conveys an equivalent for what we have come to recognize as stream of consciousness' (Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 280). Amongst those who construct Sterne as a conservative is Walter Göbel who argues that Sterne's fundamental intentions are conservative but that they are rendered ambiguous and thus undermined by his dialogue with contemporaneous science (Walter Göbel, 'The Decentring of Man in *Tristram Shandy*', in *TShan*, 11 (1999–2000), 28–37 (p. 32)). Thomas Keymer's nuanced reading characterises Sterne's fiction as 'backward looking yet up to date' and sets it in the context of the modish fiction being published contemporaneously (Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 26). Stuart Sim brings a theoretical approach to Sterne that owes a significant debt to postmodern literary theory. He argues that there are key features of *Tristram Shandy* that anticipate postmodern science and Chaos Theory (Stuart Sim, '“All that Exists are ‘Islands of Determinism’”: Shandean Sentiment and the Dilemma

Continued on next page...

mapped its relationship to a number of ideologies that were either dominant or nascent in the context (such as sentimentalism) or have mapped its position in the development of the poetics of fiction.² Some approaches have used it as a proof-text for their literary theory.³ There have been some treatments of its relationship to the theological milieu in which it was articulated, but there has been no treatment of its relationship to the theodicy debate.⁴ This is a highly significant omission because arguments about the apparent incoherence of belief in a loving and all-powerful God whilst evil exists in the world are a very important philosophical and theological theme in that very same milieu.

¹ Continued from previous page...

of Postmodern Physics', in *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, ed. by David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 109–21 (p. 109)). Ruth Perry argues that 'the talk in [*Tristram Shandy* and] its verbal play [is] rooted in the primacy of male friendship and in a subliminal distrust of women' (Ruth Perry, 'Words for Sex: The Verbal-Sexual Continuum in *Tristram Shandy*', in *Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Marcus Walsh (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 51–68 (p. 54)).

² Pre-eminent in this area is Mullan's extensive treatment of Sterne in *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; repr. 2000). In his reading of *Tristram Shandy* in relation to contemporaneous philosophical and religious scepticism — including the fact that sceptical procedures were used within religious orthodoxy — Fred Parker also categorises Sterne as being 'like many another eighteenth-century promoter of sensibility' (Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 199). Wayne Booth's analysis of the narrative technique of Sterne's fiction as a fusion of earlier traditions to create something 'genuinely new' is given as part of an overall account of the poetics of fiction (Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1991), pp. 229–30).

³ Perhaps the most well known example is that of Viktor Shklovsky, a key figure in Russian Formalism, who famously uses *Tristram Shandy* as 'an illustration of the general laws of novelistic form' (Viktor Shklovsky, 'A Parodying Novel: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*', trans. by W. George Isaak, in *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Traugott, pp. 66–89 (p. 66)).

⁴ The politico-theological aspects of Sterne's fiction are treated by Martha Bowden in 'Guy Fawkes, Dr. Slop, and the Actions of Providence' (*PQ*, 76 (1997), 437–53) in which she argues that *Tristram Shandy* needs to be elucidated by reference to the political feast days in the Church of England and the subauditions of Slop's Catholic identity. Melvyn New deals extensively with the theological dimension to Sterne's fiction in a number of articles and asserts in 'Sterne as Preacher: A Visit to St. Michael's Church, Coxwold', (*TShan*, 5 (1993), 160–67) that the importance of Sterne's religious profession is widely dismissed or ignored by critics.

As is well known, ‘theodicy was given a new impetus in the philosophy of the Enlightenment’.⁵ Not only was it a significant preoccupation for professional clergy like Sterne and for religious controversialists, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 had intensified the debate in the years during which the first volumes of *Tristram Shandy* were being written — Volumes I and II were first published in December 1759. What is more, *Candide*, which is possibly the most widely recognised contemporaneous fiction to be preoccupied with theodicy still in print, is invoked in the opening chapters of *Tristram Shandy*.⁶ Furthermore, Sterne, in a letter of 5 October 1759 to Robert Dodsley his printer, specified that the format of *Tristram Shandy* should resemble that of another highly significant fiction on the theme of theodicy: Johnson’s *Rasselas*.⁷ More significant than these teasing allusions is the fact that *Tristram Shandy* is deeply preoccupied with questions of causality and *A Sentimental Journey* devotes a lot of material to the status of compassion and the significance of the suffering that evokes it. These themes are profoundly related to theodicy and everything that follows in this thesis constitutes an attempt to explore them.

Throughout, *Sterne’s fiction* is defined as ‘*Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*’. *The Continuation of the Bramine’s Journal* (like so many other things related to Sterne’s literary output) is a classic borderline case that seems to defy neat definition and even calls into question the validity of some literary critical categories — in what sense is it a fiction? Does the fact that it wasn’t complete or published in Sterne’s lifetime make any

⁵ David Hempton, ‘Evil/Theodicy’, in *A Dictionary of Eighteenth Century History*, ed. by Jeremy Black and Roy Porter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 233.

⁶ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: The Text*, ed. by Melvyn New and Joan New, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, 2 vols ([n.p.]: University Presses of Florida, 1978), I, pp. 16-17.

⁷ Laurence Sterne, *The Letters*, ed. by Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, 2 vols (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), I, p. 96. As New points out, Dodsley had played a part in the publication of *Rasselas* in April of that year (Sterne, *Letters*, I, p. 98, n. 5).

difference to its status?⁸ Its exclusion from the following analysis may seem strange as it is not short of moments that explicitly beg for reference to the theodicy debate. For example, Yorick exclaims at one point:

Heaven! to what distressful Encountres [*sic*] hast thou thought fit to expose me — & was it not, that thou hast blessd [*sic*] me with a chearfulness of disposition — & thrown an Object in my Way, That is to render that Sun Shine perpetual — Thy dealings with me would be a mystery.⁹

Explicit apostrophes to providence and references to the benevolence of God are far from infrequent in *The Bramine's Journal*. The main reason for the slightly counterintuitive decision to exclude it from the following analysis is straightforward: an important subsidiary theme of this thesis depends on some reference to the contemporaneous critical reception of Sterne's fiction. Needless to say, no such evidence exists for *The Bramine's Journal* simply because it wasn't published in a complete edition until 1904.¹⁰

The theodicy debate and the term 'evil'

The term *theodicy* is perhaps most succinctly explained by the title of a modern, populist book on the subject by an American rabbi, Harold Kushner: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.¹¹ Judaeo-Christian theism asserts that God is both all-powerful and

⁸ Just to underscore the complications of ascribing genre to Sterne's literary output, it is worth noting Elizabeth Bohls's valid assertion that, 'Sterne's book, [i.e. *A Sentimental Journey*] now considered a novel, was received at its first publication as a travel account' (Elizabeth Bohls, 'Age of Peregrination: Travel Writing and the Eighteenth-Century Novel', in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia <<http://www.blackwellreference.com>> [accessed 9 February 2010]). Whatever the term 'novel' may imply, with *A Sentimental Journey*, it is slightly safer to apply the term 'fiction'.

⁹ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy AND Continuation of the Bramine's Journal*, ed. by Melvyn New and W.G. Day, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne vi (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 201.

¹⁰ See New's 'Introduction' to *A Sentimental Journey*. *The Bramine's Journal* was published, of course, under the title of *The Journal to Eliza* and that is the title it has carried most commonly ever since (*A Sentimental Journey*, p. xli).

¹¹ The book was occasioned by the death of his fourteen-year-old son after ten years of suffering from progeria (Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1983), p. 2).

all-loving, and yet evil exists (or apparently exists) in the world. The opponents of theism have long since asserted — and continue to assert — that this is an insoluble contradiction that disproves either the power of God or the loving kindness of God and that it follows that the God of the theists does not exist. The theodicy debate has a number of other technical names such as *the Epicurean Paradox* and *the Problem of Evil* — in spite of which, this thesis is going to use the term ‘evil’ very sparingly.¹²

‘Evil’ is a dangerously imprecise word when used in an analysis of the theodicy debate because its denotation has achieved something of a quantum leap since the eighteenth century. In contemporary usage, it tends almost exclusively to carry heavily religious or supernaturalist overtones. This was not the case in the context of Sterne’s fiction: it could be used not only to cover the idea of a quality of demonic origin, but also for rather everyday and morally neutral events. For example, *The Oxford English Dictionary* in its second denotation of the word gives a range of quotations dating from 1165 to 1868 covering ‘evil’ in the sense of ‘hurtful’ and including an extract from Culpepper dated 1655 where he states that, ‘In a great Headach it is evil to have the outward parts cold’.¹³ The word ‘evil’ in modern usage is too dramatic to apply to the dangers of not wrapping up properly when one has a headache. Because this sense of ‘evil’ is effectively obsolete, in general the term this thesis will prefer is *suffering*.

¹² Perhaps the most famous (albeit dubious) ascription of the theodicy question to Epicurus is found in Hume where the character of Philo states, ‘EPICURUS’S old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [i.e. the Deity] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?’ ([David] Hume, ‘Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion’, in *Hume on Religion*, ed. by Richard Wollheim (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1963), pp. 205-29 (p. 172)). There are a number of books published on theodicy which use the phrase, ‘The Problem of Evil’, as part of their title which indicates the extent to which it has become a shorthand term for the question; for example see, *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, ed. by Mark Larrimore (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

¹³ *OED* <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> [accessed January 28th 2010].

The ‘evils’ so often introduced as evidence in the theodicy debate are the ones that lead to human pain, sickness, loss, grief, and premature death.¹⁴ All too often, when people ask, ‘How can a loving God permit evil?’ what is meant is, ‘How can a loving God permit humans to suffer inexplicably, pointlessly, or undeservedly?’. C.S. Lewis made an understandable decision to entitle his book on the subject *The Problem of Pain* rather than ‘The Problem of Evil’. However, ‘pain’ as a term has a problem that also renders it less than ideal: in contemporary theodicies and ethical debates, it is often differentiated from ‘suffering’ on the basis that its denotation more strictly covers physical pain, whereas ‘suffering’ tends readily to encompass mental anguish with or without physical pain.¹⁵ *Theodicy*, in both its technical and popular form, tends to be best translated as, ‘The answer to the challenge to theism from the problem of apparently pointless or unjustifiable human suffering’.

The word *theodicy* itself was minted by Leibniz in his seminal defence of the Christian, theistic explanation for evil published in 1710. In etymological terms, it simply means, ‘the justice/justification of God’. Leibniz’s book famously contended, on rationalist grounds, ‘that this universe must be [...] better than every other possible

¹⁴ That the suffering in question is almost exclusively human draws attention to something significant about the formal theodicy debate: it is highly anthropocentric. C.S. Lewis’s influential book on theodicy, *The Problem of Pain*, is rather notable for the fact that it has a chapter dealing with the question of animal pain (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), pp. 117-31). George Barker-Benfield rightly asserts that a concern with the humane treatment of animals was a highly significant feature of the Cult of Sentiment (G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 231-247). That this also may have an unrecognised link with the theodicy debate is outside the remit of this thesis. In more technical terms, there is a good reason why formal theodicy rarely deals with animal suffering: the debate about moral evil assumes the capacity for morally imputable action. For a very long time, mainstream ethical debate in the Western tradition has not given any serious consideration to the idea that animals are capable of morally imputable actions — tigers do not murder, they kill.

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry draws a distinction between ‘physical pain’ and ‘psychological suffering’ (Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 11).

universe’ and this is what inspired Voltaire’s satire of Leibniz in *Candide* as the absurdly optimistic Dr. Pangloss.¹⁶ *Candide*, of course, relentlessly insists that it is the existence of extreme moral wickedness and natural disaster that makes Pangloss’s belief unsustainable.¹⁷ In the course of what follows, the term *theodictic* will be taken to refer to ‘any utterance whose meaning requires reference to the orthodox, Judaeo-Christian, theist contention that God is both all-loving and all-powerful’.¹⁸

Rudolf Freiburg, one of the editors of *‘But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man’: Literature and Theodicy* (which is probably the most significant collection of essays examining the relationship between literature and theodicy) is not alone in asserting its gathering importance in the eighteenth century. However, he says something that is both correct and rather unusual in the field of literary criticism:

The identification of literature with theodicy is particularly intense during the Augustan Age, which has rightly been called ‘the age of theodicy’.¹⁹

What seems contestable in this statement is the claim that there is a particularly ‘intense identification of literature with theodicy’. The evidence for this seems to be counterfactual: the subject is not much examined by literary critics.²⁰ More interestingly,

¹⁶ G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. by E.M. Huggard, ed. by Austin Farrer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), p. 378.

¹⁷ For example, Pangloss, reduced to poverty and physically rotted by syphilis, refuses to concede that this is the result of something demonic but was rather ‘a thing unavoidable, a necessary ingredient, in the best of worlds’ (M. de Voltaire, *Candid or All for the Best* (London: J. Nourse, 1759), p. 14).

¹⁸ The most natural denotation for the term ‘theodictic’ would be to limit it to defences of orthodox theism’s solutions of the problem of evil — after all, that is its etymological implication as Leibniz minted it. However, because of the ambiguities of the relationship between Sterne’s fiction and theodicy, a term is needed to describe utterances and implications that can be understood simply *in relation to* theodicy, or in some way shaped by it, whether or not they are sympathetic to it.

¹⁹ Rudolf Freiburg, ‘The Pleasures of Pain? Soame Jenyns *versus* Samuel Johnson’, in *‘But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man’: Literature and Theodicy*, ed. by Rudolf Freiburg and Susanne Gruss (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2004), pp. 225-44 (p. 227).

²⁰ The most significant book to be published in recent times about Sterne’s religious milieu, *Yorick’s Congregation* by Bowden, does not mention theodicy at all. Bowden’s book has merits,

Continued on next page...

even *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man*, despite considerable attention devoted to a range of canonical authors from the eighteenth century, barely mentions Sterne's fiction. It may be, of course, that *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are too readily categorised as comic novels and that, like Walter Shandy, they construct the problem of metaphysically unjustifiable suffering, if at all, as nothing more than a 'puzzling riddle'.²¹ However, this is not the implication of the texts. What is more certain is that the largely humanist theoretical framework that is common to most of the contributions to *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man* does not neatly fit Sterne's fiction and none of the contributors capitalises on the insights into the representation of suffering in literature that can be gleaned by attending to its fetishistic aspect.

Žižek's concept of fetishism

Slavoj Žižek's writings are gaining an increasing measure of influence in the field of cultural studies. His theoretical perspective owes significant debts to Marxism, Lacan,

²⁰ Continued from previous page...

but it also has demerits and one of them is the omission of any reference to theodicy (Martha F. Bowden, *Yorick's Congregation: The Church of England in the Time of Laurence Sterne* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007)). By contrast, Lamb's excellent analysis of the relationship between theodicy and literature argues that, 'It is tempting to speculate that the novels written between the 1740s and the 1760s tackle the issue of realism not as a formal principle of verisimilitude standing in opposition to the improbabilities of romance, but as a surge of particulars and little circumstances that arises from the interruptibility of all theodicies, an epiphenomenon of the failure of consolation which places its own stress on theories of probable representation' (Jonathan Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 89). Lamb's analysis sets up an array of critical tools to identify theodictic elements in literary writing, many of which are specifically relevant to Sterne's fiction. He does not choose, however, to focus in any detailed or specific manner on Sterne, and his approach (though aware of Žižek) does not analyse the fetishistic aspects of theodicy in literature.

²¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 340. The comedic character of Sterne's fiction does not blind many critics to the significance of suffering. Terry Eagleton plausibly characterises *Tristram Shandy* as, 'a defeatist tale of the blighted and battered, of impotence and disfigurement, of lives of quiet desperation [...]. Life is one long set of petty errors, annoyances and frustrations, the ruin of all grand ideals. Knowledge is just a series of hypotheses, language is a way of not communicating, and causality a snare in which you come to grief' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 92). It is slightly odd, given this characterisation, that Eagleton is not more tempted to make a connection between *Tristram Shandy* and the theodicy debate.

and German Idealism (especially Kant and Hegel). One of the more notable aspects of his writing is his habit of illustrating his points by references to film and popular culture. Žižek gives a number of illustrations of his version of the concept of the *fetish*.²² Perhaps the most useful is in *On Belief* where he argues that the pet dog of a deceased lover operates as a fetish:

In Nevil Shute's World War II melodramatic novel *Requiem for a WREN*, the heroine survives her lover's death without any visible traumas, she goes on with her life and is even able to talk rationally about the lover's death — because she still has the dog who was the lover's favoured pet. When, some time after, the dog is accidentally run over by a truck, she collapses and her entire world disintegrates.²³

For Žižek, a fetish is defined by what he calls its 'disavowed belief [that some unendurable or excessive state of affairs exists]'.²⁴ This is also often referred to as the 'disavowed lie' and he often defines it with variations on the theme of the Marxist formula of 'they do not know it but they are doing it' — a phrase which is rather obscure at first sight.²⁵ Sometimes he defines the fetishist mindset as reducible to the formula: 'I know very well [...] but nonetheless'.²⁶ In other words, he characterises it as a simultaneous *knowing but not knowing* — the heroine of Shute's novel could say, '*I know very well* that my lover is dead, *but nonetheless I don't know* that he is dead because I still have his favoured pet which operates as a fetish to help me disavow the painful truth'. The quotation already cited from *The Bramine's Journal* contains what appears to be a straightforward example of a fetish: Yorick acknowledges that 'Heaven' has exposed

²² The definition of *fetish* that will be used by this thesis will deliberately avoid its more technical Lacanian version as something that 'fills out the void of the missing maternal phallus' (Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 161). That the additional, technical exposition that this would require is superfluous is suggested by the fact that Žižek himself habitually refers to 'fetishism' in a way that can encompass both its Marxist and Lacanian modes.

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2006), p. 14.

²⁴ *On Belief*, p. 14.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 30.

²⁶ *On Belief*, p. 126.

him to ‘distressful Encountres’ and that its dealings with him would be ‘a mystery’ were it not that it had ‘thrown an Object’ in his way to make ‘perpetual’ the ‘Sun Shine’ of his providentially bestowed ‘chearfulness of disposition’.²⁷ In other words, the relationship with Eliza holds at bay the otherwise inexplicable nature of some of his sufferings unassociated with Eliza.

It is important to realise that, for Žižek, there is nothing essentially delusional about the fetishist manoeuvre:

a fetish can play a very constructive role in allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thorough ‘realists,’ able to accept the way things effectively are — since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality.²⁸

Based on his own experience of the end of the communist state in Yugoslavia, one of the significant undertones of Žižek’s writing is the way in which state functionaries in totalitarian regimes energetically prop up a political edifice whose ideological claims they know to be unsustainable.²⁹ It was as if they *knew but didn’t know* that the cause they were devoting their life to was based on an irreconcilable contradiction — and this, of course, resonates with the critique of classic theodicy. It is this which makes Žižek’s theoretical tools potentially so illuminating when applied to the writings of Sterne who was a paid functionary of a state-sponsored religious institution and whose literary output was received with such ambivalence by his co-religionists.

²⁷ *Continuation of the Bramine’s Journal*, p. 201.

²⁸ *On Belief*, p. 14.

²⁹ For example, ‘The paradoxical functioning of the “People” in the totalitarian universe can be most easily detected through analysis of phrases like “the whole people supports the Party”. [In] the Stalinist universe, “supporting the rule of the Party” is “rigidly designated” by the term “People” — it is, in the last analysis, *the only feature which in all possible worlds defines the People*. That is why the real member of the People is only he who supports the rule of the Party: those who work against its rule are automatically excluded from the People; they become the “enemies of the People” ’ (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 147).

However, the question is not necessarily whether Sterne himself was a fetishist; it is rather whether or not his fiction trades on a fetishist manoeuvre within its context. If it does then the next question is: what is the ‘disavowed lie’ underneath the fetish? For highly secularised readings of Sterne’s fiction (given its playfully sexual preoccupations), the disavowed lie is religious belief and mainstream Christian sexual ethics *per se* and, perhaps, contemporary debates about the philosophical implications of full-blown atheistic materialism.³⁰ Such a reading of any purportedly fetishistic elements in Sterne’s fiction is thoroughly plausible but it is not exhaustive. *Tristram Shandy* is packed from beginning to end with telling allusions and *double entendres*, asterisks, and unfilled gaps tied into regular attempts to tease the reader with the thought that she is importing transgressive meanings into her interpretation of the text. *A Sentimental Journey* also spends a great deal of time playing with the boundaries of literary propriety with the same implication that readers import their own undeclared associations. It could almost be said that the single most prominent feature of Sterne’s fiction is its game with ‘knowing but not knowing’. Žižek’s concept of the fetish seems to be made for Sterne’s fiction.

It could be objected that, in an examination of the theodictic nature of fetishism in Sterne’s fiction, the greatest proportion of incidents of a fetishistic character are defined by a repressed libidinal subtext rather than a theodictic character. However, they do not account for all such incidents by any means: there are significantly fetishistic

³⁰ In an excellent analysis of the contemporaneous tendency to conflate philosophical materialism with libertinism and with writings with a visibly libidinous import, Scott Nowka argues that Sterne’s fiction sets out to refute the current form of materialism. He also argues that the contradictions between the sexual excesses of his personal life and his profession as a clergyman are paralleled in his portrayal of uncle Toby as a ‘career soldier who recreates military violence in his free time and the man who releases the fly out of the window’. Sterne, he argues, sees ‘no [...] incongruity’ in this fact (Scott Nowka, ‘Talking Coins and Thinking Smoke-Jacks: Satirizing Materialism in Gildon and Sterne’, *ECentF*, 22 (2009-10), 196-222 (p. 218)).

undertones to textual moments that focus on suffering and empathy.³¹ What is more, the transgressively sexual nature of so many fetishistic moments in both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* may also have a theodictic element that is anachronistically misread by contemporary readers.³²

A great deal of the argument supporting this thesis depends on a reference to Lacanian theory in the form developed by Žižek. This gives rise to a very simple but very important objection: what if Lacanian theory is intellectually suspect? After all, it was developed primarily as a clinical practice whose psychoanalytic position is roundly criticised for having major, empirical shortcomings.³³ What is more, it is plagued by the fact that a number of its key concepts are notoriously slippery or hard to translate.³⁴ It is not within the remit of this thesis to assess the clinical value of Lacanian theory but it is worth noting Žižek's claim that, for Lacan, 'psychoanalysis itself is a method of reading texts, oral [...] or written'.³⁵ If it is to be assessed in this context, it must be evaluated

³¹ This will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 6 below.

³² This will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 1 below.

³³ This is, of course, a fairly standard criticism of anything that owes a substantial epistemological debt to Freud and which Eagleton obliquely refers to in his succinct overview of the main criticisms of Freudian theory in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 140-42. One must also remember, as Rice and Waugh observe, that some of the most vehement denunciations of Lacanian theory attack it as sexist (Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edn (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 124). Perry argues from a feminist perspective that *Tristram Shandy* could have been written by a fully paid up Lacanian disciple and that its constitutively verbal world is deeply expressive of 'a subliminal mistrust of women' (Perry, p. 54). This must be counterbalanced by the fact that there are feminist critics like Helene Moglen who argue that not all of Lacan is irredeemable (Helene Moglen, *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001)).

³⁴ For example, terms of central importance like *jouissance* have no exact English translation and the concept of *objet petit a* (the unattainable object of desire) acquires new layers of meaning when, in a later development, Lacan attaches to it the concept of *agalma*, i.e. the Platonic metaphor for truth being like a treasure hidden in a 'rustic box' (Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 671-702 (p. 699)).

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), p. 5. Moglen's excellent

Continued on next page...

according to its viability as a critical rather than as an empirical tool. The value of the Žižek-Lacanian approach to literary texts does not have to be assessed by clinical observations of patients or references to neuroscience, it subsists in its coherence as a description of cultural practice. In that arena, despite the cumbersome opacity of some of the terminology, some of it is extremely viable — indeed, it is notable that one of Žižek’s main illustrations of the concept of fetish (i.e. the reference to Shute’s *Requiem for a WREN*) is based on a thoroughly plausible reading of an incident in a piece of prose fiction.

The title of this thesis

In the middle of all the confusions surrounding the birth of Tristram, Walter Shandy complains to Toby that the ‘marriage state’ has more ‘asses loads’ of ‘puzzling riddles’ than could have been carried by ‘all *Job*’s stock of asses’.³⁶ For Walter, the most intricate of all those riddles is the fact that, when one woman is in labour in a household, every female ‘from my lady’s gentlewoman down to the cinder-wench, becomes an inch taller for it’.³⁷ This invocation of the sufferings of Job, the central figure of Old Testament theodicy, is designedly bathetic and equally intricate. The biblical text not only reports that the wealthy Job had a ‘very great household’ that includes ‘seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, [...] and five-hundred she-asses’, it also tells us that, in a

³⁵ Continued from previous page...

work, *The Trauma of Gender*, makes extensive use of Lacan and also applies it to Sterne’s fiction: she rightly asserts that ‘*Tristram Shandy* is uncanny in its Lacanian presumptions [...]. Lacan’s formulations elucidate Sterne’s view that the restrictions of language reflect and reproduce all other lacks’ (Moglen, p. 13). Eagleton also characterises Sterne as ‘pre-Freudian’ (Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 82).

³⁶ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 340.

³⁷ Ibid.

series of calamities permitted by God, Satan is allowed progressively to strip Job of his wealth, his livestock, the lives of his children, and his health.³⁸

Walter's allusion seems to be set in the middle of a spectrum of implications at one end of which is his misogynist sense of a threat to patriarchal order (tied in with a possibly libidinal and dismissive subtext about 'she-asses') and at the other is Toby's empathic response to the acute suffering of women in childbirth. It is as if the text invites the reader both to laugh and to empathise. Confusingly, the success of the joke and the pathetic representation of suffering depend on the reader somehow repressing the other half of the equation — their implications are mutually exclusive. Just in case the reader misses this contradiction, the text itself highlights it as it summarises the response of Walter and Toby to the sense of empowerment that women seem to gain when one of their number is in labour:

God bless }
Duce take } 'em all — said my uncle *Toby* and my father,
 } each to himself.³⁹

Here, on the surface of the text, is a concoction in which the experience of suffering is partially gilded with laughter. For anybody sympathetic to the theoretical approach of Žižek, this looks suspiciously like a fetish at the heart of which is that great theme of much eighteenth-century European philosophy and theology: the theodicy debate.

An overview of the argument

The opening chapter of this thesis argues that, to understand the theodictic dimension of Sterne's fiction, it is necessary to give an account of the character of theodicy in the context. The reason for this is simple: the approaches to the problem of evil vary considerably depending on the cultural and ideological context in which they develop. Key aspects of the contemporaneous theodicy debate reveal the theodictic character of a

³⁸ Job 1.3, 13-19.

³⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 340.

crucial feature of Sterne's fiction, namely its implication that human suffering is very hard to evaluate. It also shows that one of the major themes in the theodicies of the time — the assertion that the mathematically exact, Newtonian conception of the cosmos proved the existence of providence — is a fetishistic mask for the 'disavowed lie' that nature reveals itself to be purely mechanical and not the expression of a personal God. Finally, another significant theme of theodicies of the time — the belief that excessive and illicit pleasure provoked divine displeasure resulting in natural catastrophes — emerges as a fetish disguising anxieties about the management of pleasure. The argument is that Sterne's fiction, which is so profoundly concerned with the difficulties of giving an ordered account of life and the boundaries of literary propriety, needs to be understood by reference to the theodicy debate.

Chapter 2 argues further that the theodicy debate should not be understood simply in terms of the writings of preachers, philosophers, and religious controversialists, but that there is a theodictic dimension to the fictional representation of stoical attempts to manage suffering.⁴⁰ Nor is this far from the surface when fiction tries to create in the reader's mind a sense of an omniscient presence behind the text that can explain and justify the crises experienced by the characters. Sterne's fiction as a whole radically examines the idea of authorial omniscience. Theodicy is also a significant component of the description of subjects interpreting everyday experiences as a communication from the transcendent — a concept that indirectly features in Sterne's fiction. The chapter contends that there are important theodictic undertones in the title of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*: it proclaims its ironic relationship to the Stoic

⁴⁰ This is, quite rightly, the founding presumption of so many of the essays in Freiburg and Gruss's, *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man*. Freiburg's argument in the introduction to the book, which postulates the idea of literature as theodicy, will be dealt with in Chapter 3 below.

philosopher, Epictetus, who attributes suffering not to things-in-themselves but to the opinions we have of them.⁴¹ It also devotes significant attention to the idea that humans identify themselves as the objects of experiences as if they were messages. In thematic terms, the literary dimension to the theodicy debate is deeply inscribed into Sterne's fiction — and it hasn't been given sufficient critical attention.

Chapter 3 argues that, if an adequate account of Sterne's fiction must involve some reference to the theodicy debate, then the narrative technique of the fictions must have some kind of theodictic reference — after all, very few fictions are more blatantly obsessed with narrative technique. It may be that the fictions are pointing towards the possibility that the very act of creating a narrative has an implicitly religious and fetishistic tendency. The application to Sterne's fictions of the narratological theories of Galen Strawson and Gary Saul Morson, despite the fact that they do not come from a psychoanalytic tradition, produces results that point towards Žižek's concept of the *Master-Signifier*, i.e. Sterne's fictions are a demonstration of the failure of the roles of the empirical and clerical autobiographers to live up to their symbolic title-mandates.⁴² This is also implicit in the readings of Sterne's fiction by Wolfgang Iser and Virginia Woolf who, in slightly different ways, argue that Sterne's fiction is a demonstration of *being in the midst* — a state in which the wider significance of events is hard to grasp. The consequence of the inevitable failure of the Master-Signifier is that it calls into question the possibility of any adequate understanding of some underlying principle of providence.

⁴¹ Epictetus, *All The Works of Epictetus, Which Are Now Extant*, trans. by Elizabeth Carter (Dublin: Hulton Bradley, 1759), p. 390. The term 'Δογματα' ('dogmata') in the title quotation for Volume I of *Tristram Shandy* means 'opinions' (See *Tristram Shandy*, I, Title Page).

⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2008), p. 39.

Chapter 4 argues that the theodictic undertones in Sterne's fiction are deeply conditioned by their relation to the orthodox Christian defence against the problem of evil that appeals to the belief that biological death is not the end of life and that the good will be rewarded and the bad punished in an afterlife. Sterne's fiction needs to be understood in relation to the fact that one of the reasons why certain renowned authors are sometimes called 'immortal' is because there is a subliminal belief in some minds that publication bestows on the author something that can survive biological death. Preoccupations with the avoidance of death and the way that readers identify texts with their authors are major themes in Sterne's fiction — and anxieties about the unsustainability of the orthodox Christian belief in personal immortality may be related to this. Žižek persuasively describes the way that human language itself seems to have a life of its own that is not dependent on the biological existence of a given speaker.⁴³ In the light of this, key aspects of Sterne's fiction that deal with language and fiction as a kind of incarnation of consciousness take on a significant, ambiguous, and theodictic quality. However, Sterne's fiction also shows an awareness of another form of incarnation in text: the plagiaristic appropriation of authoritative writers. In his context, the practice of plagiarism was positively admired in the composition of sermons.⁴⁴ In the fiction, it is used to play around the margins of the idea that the creation of texts erases the identity of specific authors. Finally, Sterne's fiction also shows an awareness of an explicitly theodictic anxiety surrounding the ridiculing of reflections on death in the writings of William Warburton.

Chapter 5 examines the theodictic dimension of the representation of class hierarchy in Sterne's fiction. Warburton's writings defend the belief that benevolent

⁴³ Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Melvyn New, *The Sermons of Laurence Sterne: The Notes*, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne v (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. xvi.

providence and compensatory rewards for virtue after death is not merely the product of a need felt by individuals in the face of suffering, it was also felt to be an important prop in the maintenance of social order.⁴⁵ What is more, the importance of unjustifiable suffering as an object for sentimental sympathy played a significant role in establishing bourgeois identity. Theodicy in literature cannot be separated from its representations of class hierarchy and identity. There is also good reason to suppose that the emergent ideological preoccupation with developing a rational social order stimulated a repressed reaction of resentment: a truly rational social order is also an order in which social inferiority is equally rationally justified. Žižek's analysis of John Rawls's rationalistic theory of justice, if applied to the analysis of Sterne's fiction, might help to explain the character of some of the irrationalities in its depiction of social hierarchy.⁴⁶ What is more, in some of the sermons and poetry that influenced Sterne's fiction, there is a tendency to reinforce the religious virtue of resignation and the acceptance of one's social station as part of a providential order. These themes are both theodictic and constitute a significant subtext in Sterne's fiction.

Chapter 6 argues that it is not really possible to give an adequate account of Sterne's fiction without examining its relationship to the cult of sensibility. Nor is it possible to talk of sensibility without discussing the significance of compassion. In turn, it is not really possible to speak about compassion without speaking about sympathy for the suffering. There is a theodictic dimension to sensibility whose manifestation in Sterne's fiction is highly significant despite all of its ambiguities. The sentimental dimension to Sterne's fiction is packed with fetishistic aspects: suffering is a necessary commodity for compassion, but compassion is not always entirely altruistic. This in turn

⁴⁵ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 4 vols (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1738–41; London: Millar and Tonson, 1765; repr. New York: Garland, 1978), I, pp. 20–23.

⁴⁶ *How to Read Lacan*, pp. 36–37.

draws attention to the fact that religious justifications for ethical behaviour — including the promise of divinely guaranteed rewards and punishments — are a vital undertone in the theodictic fetishes both of order and continence. What is more, this is not only represented in the ethical and psychological implications of Sterne's fiction, it is also built in to the development of the word 'sentimental' itself. It is not possible to account for the sentimental dimension of Sterne's fiction without being aware of its theodictic dimension.

Chapter 1: The fetishes of order and continence

Early on in *Tristram Shandy*, the autobiographer, Tristram, reflects on the complications of interpreting human motivation and speculates on the consequences of installing ‘Momus’s glass’ in the human chest — an allusion to the character from Greek mythology who epitomises cynical fault-finding and who complains that humans had not been made fitted with a window so that it was possible to see what is really going on in the heart.¹ The following quotation could serve as a useful adjunct to Tristram’s reflections:

A man may have different views and a different sense of things from what his judges have [...]. A man, through bodily infirmity, or some complectional defect, which perhaps is not in his power to correct, — may be subject to inadvertencies, — to starts — and unhappy turns of temper; he may lay open to snares he is not always aware of [and he may be] at least an object rather to be pitied than censured with severity and ill-will. — These are difficulties which stand in one’s way in the forming a judgment of the character of others. — But, for once, let us suppose them all to be got over, so that we could see the bottom of every man’s heart; — let us allow that the word rogue, or honest man, was wrote so legibly in every man’s face, that no one could possibly mistake it; yet still the happiness of both the one and the other [...] is what we have so little certain knowledge of, — [that] whenever we venture to pronounce upon it, our decisions are little more than random guesses.²

These words are by Laurence Sterne but, despite all appearances, they are not from *Tristram Shandy*, they are from his most theodictic sermon, ‘The Ways of Providence Justified to Man’. It cannot be established with any certainty when this sermon was written — it was first published after Sterne’s death — but this does not change the fact that it expresses a significant conceptual kinship with ideas that are central to *Tristram Shandy*: the ideas that shape the fiction also play a role in the theodicy. It also does not change the fact that (as far as one can tell) the neglect of Sterne’s sermons in much of the

¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 82-83.

² Laurence Sterne, *The Sermons of Laurence Sterne: The Text*, ed. by Melvyn New, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, IV (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1996), p. 411.

criticism devoted to the fiction suggests that critics who stray into the sermons seem to come away disappointed at not finding Tristram Shandy in surplice and scarf. There do not seem to be many obvious parallels between the sermons and the fiction — or at least, there are not enough for critics to use them as a significant quarry of interpretive tools for the fictions.³ ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’, however, with its epistemological scepticism is one of the few sermons where there seems to be a more than usually clear kinship between the preaching and the fictions — and it is the only one which is specifically dedicated to questions of theodicy.⁴

In order to make the theodictic implications of Sterne’s fiction visible, it is first necessary to give some account of theodicy in the milieu in which this fiction evolved and, because a key datum is found in Sterne’s published sermons, a particular account of theodicy’s manifestation in the homiletic milieu is also needed. Even a brief survey of the relevant evidence will show that there are significant aspects of theodictic discourse contemporaneous to Sterne’s fiction that develop fetishistically in Žižek’s sense of the

³ In the ‘Preface’ to the *Sermons*, New describes a gathering of literary scholars at Coxwold Church to hear a sermon by Sterne finding that, after a couple of laughs at the beginning, the remainder of the sermon ‘turned out to be a most serious — indeed lugubrious — call to piety’ that started to prompt ‘stifled yawns and wandering glances’ (Sterne, *Sermons*, p. viii). This is, of course, not a proof of the marginal relevance of *The Sermons* to so much of the critical attention devoted to Sterne — that fact is visibly demonstrated in the array of criticism cited in this thesis which barely, if ever, refers to the sermons.

⁴ This is not to suggest that ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ is alone amongst Sterne’s sermons in its concern with theodictic questions. In ‘Sermon 19’, it is argued that ‘we live amongst mysteries and riddles, and almost every thing which comes in our way, in one light or another, may be said to baffle our understandings [and we can be misled into thinking that it was as if God] had made and sent men into the world on purpose to play the fool’ (*Sermons*, pp. 182-83). In ‘Sermon 15’ (on Job) it is argued that ‘the very first principle of religion [is that] there is a God, a powerful, a wise and good being, who first made the world and continues to govern it; — by whose goodness all things are conducted to bring about the greatest and best ends. The sorrowful and pensive wretch that was giving way to his misfortunes, and mournfully sinking under them, the moment this doctrine comes in to his aid, hushes all his complaints’ (*Sermons*, p. 146). Numerous other instances could be given.

term, i.e. avowals of ideological positions of which they are simultaneously disavowals, ‘the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth’.⁵ It is not difficult to show that theodictic preoccupations with order in nature can be disavowals of the anxiety that nature is purely mechanistic and not a manifestation of the will of the personal God asserted by theism. Likewise, arguments that divine retribution disrupts the natural order in response to the flourishing of vice can represent repressed anxieties about an unmanageable excess in the pursuit of pleasure. Both of these themes are close to the surface of Christian apologetics contemporaneous to Sterne’s fiction, both contain a significant hermeneutic potential for the criticism of those fictions, and neither has received any significant critical attention as manifestations of the crisis that produced the debate about theodicy.

When positioning Sterne’s fiction in the context of Christian theodictic apologetics, it is necessary to remember that the evidence suggests that Sterne himself was a relatively assiduous parish priest, ‘scrupulous and well informed’ in his pastoral duties, in touch with many of the everyday concerns of his community, and that he had a reputation for being an ‘excellent and affecting’ preacher.⁶ His published sermons explicitly acknowledge their debt to mainstream Anglican sources, are conventional in form, and make no secret of the fact that they were composed with extensive borrowings according to the respected homiletic norms of the day. Indeed, it is worth noting in passing that the practice of plagiarism which was regarded as a virtue in the homiletic milieu — the duty was to expound transcendental truths not personal opinion — takes

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2008), p. x. Lamb argues something that bears an analogous relationship to this concept of the fetish: he contends that Sterne learnt from the controversy that developed in the wake of Warburton’s interpretation of the Book of Job the key implication of the form of allegory: that, in allegories, figures stand for that which they are NOT (Jonathan Lamb, ‘The Job Controversy, Sterne, and the Question of Allegory’, *ECS*, 24 (1990), 1–19 (p. 11)).

⁶ Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 95.

on a highly significant and highly ironic role in the narrative practice of *Tristram Shandy*.

New is correct in principle when he asserts that:

The borrowings [in Sterne's sermons] mean nothing detrimental to Sterne's commitment to Christianity or the seriousness with which he took his clerical duties. Indeed, in joining the ongoing Anglican discourse, in borrowing his ideas and illustrations and theology from it, he was doing what I believe a vast majority of clergymen tried to do: avoid error and controversy and inadvertency when speaking 'from on high'.⁷

Any assertions about the strength of Sterne's personal religious convictions inevitably involve an element of surmise, but the substantive point to be made here is that Sterne's sermons (and hence a significant feature of his professional life) depend for their formation on an awareness of the mainstream — which is why this brief survey will draw principally from that area.⁸

The main themes of theodicy

One of the curious features of Christian apologetics in the milieu of Sterne's fiction is its relatively narrow range of themes and approaches when it turns its attention to theodicy: the main lines of argument do not have many branches. It differs from the Western theodicies that have developed since 1945 in that moral evil does not occupy quite so insistent a place in its discourse. In the mid-eighteenth century English homiletic mainstream, as will be shown in this chapter, the debate often centres around five polemical positions: the defence of General Providence (often based on the assertion

⁷ New, *The Notes to the Sermons*, p. xvi.

⁸ It should come as no surprise that critical opinion about Sterne's religious convictions is very divided. At one end of the spectrum, New argues that Sterne's fiction is not incompatible with the possibility that Sterne's views were mainstream: 'it might behoove readers of *Tristram* and *A Sentimental Journey* to entertain, at least for one moment, the possibility that the author of these fictions did not consistently hold beliefs that the author of the sermons would consider heretical, damnable, and quite simply wrong' (New, *The Sermons of Laurence Sterne: The Notes*, p. xx). Towards the other end of the spectrum, critics such as Duncan Patrick argue, in his analysis of Sterne's earliest literary efforts, that 'deistic ideas' are 'in keeping with [his] later practices' (Duncan Patrick, 'Unorthodox Theology in Two Short Works by Sterne', *RES*, 56(2005), 49-58 (p. 52)). Eagleton asserts rather confidently that if Sterne 'is more sentimentalist than [Henry] Fielding, he is also less convinced of the idea of providential design in the world' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 91).

of design in nature); the need to defend the social morality supposedly guaranteed by religious observance; the metaphysical status of pleasure (often linked to religious demands for continence); the possibility of a compensation for the good in what was often referred to as ‘a future state’; the need for resignation; and the need to accept human fallibility along with its concomitant debate about the possibility and significance of free will. These themes are common and dominant in the writings of both the orthodox and the heterodox. Given the allusion to *Candide* at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, it is worth noting that the Leibnizian/Panglossian motif of ‘the best of all possible worlds’ is not quite so central to routine polemical and apologetic approaches.⁹

In contrast to the mainstream, and despite the allusion to *Candide*, Sterne’s published approach to theodicy draws on a significantly different line of argument. It begins with a survey of a couple of the main lines of the theodictic controversies and places the promise of compensation in ‘a future state’ for undeserved suffering and the necessity of free will as a precondition of actual goodness at the centre of the theistic defence. However, the sermon does so only to take these arguments as sufficiently dealt with elsewhere and to pass on to another one: that suffering resistant to self-evident, metaphysical explanation is necessarily indecipherable to any mind without transcendent knowledge and that we should therefore suspend judgement until the end of time.¹⁰ The sermon concludes by saying:

Could we but see the mysterious workings of providence, and were we able to comprehend the whole plan of his infinite wisdom and goodness, which possibly may be the case in the final consummation of all things; — those events, which we are now so perplexed to account for, would probably exalt and magnify his wisdom, and make us cry out with the Apostle, in that rapturous exclamation, — O! the depth of the riches both of the goodness and wisdom of God! — how unsearchable are his ways, and his paths past finding out!¹¹

⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ *The Sermons*, pp. 408-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 415-16.

This line of argument owes an intellectual and visible textual debt to William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722) — a source whose influence is visible in at least eight of Sterne's forty five extant sermons.¹² Sterne is reported to have written on the manuscript (now lost) of this sermon:

I have borrowed most of the reflections upon the Characters from Wollaston, or at least have enlarged from his hints, though the Sermon is truly mine, such as it is.¹³

The defence of theistic providence on the basis of the indecipherability of suffering may not be so dominant in the milieu but it is nevertheless doctrinally unexceptionable for the orthodox despite being highly uncongenial to more strictly rationalistic contemporaneous theological tendencies. This fact too is of considerable significance in the elucidation of Sterne's fiction. Not only does 'The Ways of Providence Justified' stay within the bounds of orthodoxy, it also stands in a potentially ironic contrast to more commonly reiterated themes of contemporaneous theodicy.

The fetish of order

Whatever the dogmatic or philosophical viability of the dominant tradition of eighteenth-century British Christian theodicy may be, two of the themes mentioned above bear all the marks of tropes that appear to be used fetishistically: the Newtonian assertion of providential design in nature and the preoccupation with the metaphysical status of pleasure. These are not by any means always distinct from the other themes — indeed, they often seem to have the character of epistemological telltales in relation to them. Arguments about free will, the virtues of resignation, and the assertion of human fallibility inevitably intertwine both with concerns about the defensibility of General Providence and with guarded preoccupations with the metaphysical status of pleasure.

¹² New, *The Notes to the Sermons*, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

The line taken in ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ — i.e. the argument that suffering is indecipherable — shaped by borrowings from Wollaston is, of course, a notable exception to this process. There is a very simple reason for this: it is essentially an attempt to sidestep the theodicean problem from the outset. In the passage from Wollaston’s *Religion of Nature Delineated* that is most clearly alluded to in ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’,¹⁴ it is stated that:

it has been [...] *objected* of old, that things do not seem to be dealt according to *reason*, virtuous and good men very oft laboring under adversity, pains, persecutions, whilst vitious, wicked, cruel men prevail and flourish. [...] But to this an answer is ready. [...] 1. We are not always certain, who are *good*, who *wicked*. [...] 2. We are not in all cases competent judges of the *good* or *bad fortune* of other people [...]. That which is disagreeable to one, is many times agreeable to another or disagreeable in a less degree. [...]

If what is objected, be in many instances true, this only infers the *necessity* of a future state: that is, if good and bad men are not respectively treated according to reason in *this life*, they may yet be so treated, if *this* and *another* to follow be taken together into the account.¹⁵

Wollaston seems to say in this passage that there is no point in trying to come up with a formula for explaining the distribution of pleasure and suffering as we can never in this life have sufficient knowledge to develop one. The idea that human experience may be hard to evaluate is indisputably one of the key themes of Sterne’s fiction. However, it does not exclude the other lines of theodictic discourse from the possibility of achieving a significant hermeneutic value in the elucidation of Sterne’s fiction. The kernel of their importance in that hermeneutic task lies in their fetishistic possibilities and their appearance as highly significant undertones in Sterne’s fiction. To assert their use and evolution as fetishes in relation to the explanation of suffering, one question only need be asked: what is the disavowed knowledge that they are partially sublimating?

¹⁴ Sterne, *The Sermons*, p. 409.

¹⁵ [William Wollaston,] *The Religion of Nature Delineated* ([n.p.]: [n.pub], 1722), pp. 80-83.

The idea that ‘nature’ has an inherent beauty and order is not peculiar to a culture living in the wake of the development of Newtonian cosmology. Whether or not appeals to the beauty of nature and cosmic order are festooned with references to Newtonianism, they are so numerous in theodictic writings and so often put on the face of the argument that their significance cannot be ignored. Soame Jenyns (whose writing on theodicy was well known in the period) provides a rather typical example:

Whilst we find ourselves liable to innumerable miseries in this life; apprehensive of still greater in another, and can give no probable account of this our wretched situation, what sentiments must we entertain of the justice and benevolence of our Creator, who placed us in it, without our sollicitations, or consent? The works of the Creation sufficiently demonstrate his existence, their beauty, perfection, and magnificence his infinite power, and wisdom; but it is the Happiness only, which we enjoy, or hope for, which can convince us of his Goodness.¹⁶

Perhaps the most significant qualification in this argument is the use of ‘perfection’ as one of the evidences of the ‘infinite [...] wisdom’ of the creator: the attribution of wisdom to God is an indispensable postulate of theism and, above all, it is an attribute that implies volition and, therefore, personhood. Wollaston similarly, in the middle of an explicitly theodictic passage, describes the world as ‘such a beautiful, admirable system’ and argues that this is one of the key evidences of ‘the goodness and beneficence’ of ‘the First cause, who is the fountain of power’.¹⁷ The fact that *The Religion of Nature Delineated* asserts a nearly self-evident order to nature in one passage and counterintuitively argues that suffering is indecipherable (thus implicitly anomalous in that order) is not only an indicator of its own epistemological unevenness, it means that the borrowing from this work underlying Sterne’s ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ becomes more significant: it draws on an anomaly.

¹⁶ [Soame Jenyns,] *A Free Enquiry Into the Nature and Origin of Evil in Six Letters to —* (London: R & J. Dodsley, 1757), p. 3.

¹⁷ Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature*, p. 28.

The contrast inherent in that choice becomes even stronger when the sermon is set next to the more rigorously self-consistent line followed by one of Newton's well established public apologists and also one of his closer friends, Samuel Clarke, who is cited by New as one of the three most significant influences on Sterne's published sermons after Tillotson and Wollaston.¹⁸ In one of his most theodictic sermons (cited by New as relevant to 'The Ways of Providence Justified'), and with an architectonic display of rationalisations, Clarke dismisses almost every cause of human suffering considered in the light of providence as a necessary corollary of the benevolence of an all-powerful God. In other words, the shortness of life is more acceptable if you do not repress the sense of the inevitability of death which in turn vindicates the mercy of God in allowing life at all. What once were apparently imperfections in nature (and hence indications of imperfection in its supposed creator) are now explicable with improved science — and suffering as a result of human inequality disappears when one accepts one's station in life.¹⁹ At the heart of this is Clarke's description of Providence as:

*That Power, which in the frame and construction of the natural World, has adjusted all things by Weight and Measure: That Power, which with exquisite artifice has made every thing in the exactest harmony and proportion, to conspire regularly and uniformly towards accomplishing the best and wisest Ends, in compleating the beautiful Order and Fabrick of the Material Universe: That Power, might in his government of the moral World likewise, in his disposing of intelligent and rational creatures, even though we could give no account at all of his ways, yet with the justest reason to be believed to direct all things for the best, and in order to bring about the noblest and most excellent Ends. [Therefore] have we reason to submit, not only with patience and resignation, but even with joy and Satisfaction, to his good pleasure in all things; Firmly believing that, in the frame of nature, those things which by Atheistical Philosophers were anciently looked upon as arguments of Error and Defect, of want either of Knowledge or Goodness in the formation of the material World, are since discovered to be most useful Contrivances, and Evidences of the most perfect and consummate Wisdom.*²⁰

¹⁸ New, *The Notes to the Sermons*, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

²⁰ Samuel Clarke, 'Of Resignation to the Divine Will in Affliction' in *Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions*, 2 vols (Dublin: S. Powell, 1734), II, pp. 64-69 (pp. 67-68).

In theodictic terms, the line taken in ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ is, of course, significantly different from this. However, the fetishistic possibility contained in Clarke’s argument is suggested by the fact that the data taken by this sermon to be evidence of the existence of a transcendental designer of nature is also used in other hands as evidence both for hard determinism and La Mettrian materialism: the regularity of nature is also the regularity of a machine devoid either of autonomy or of the characteristics normally considered indispensable to theistic concepts of the personhood of God (remembering that La Mettrie’s account of mechanistic nature is not coupled with the assertion of hard determinism).²¹ As an English translation of La Mettrie published ten years before the publication of the first part of *Tristram Shandy* puts it:

The multitude of proofs which [the arguments of deists and theists] collect from the beauties of nature display’d, does not add to their strength. The structure of one finger alone, an ear, an eye, an observation of *Malphigi* [i.e. Marcello Malpighi, a seventeenth-century Italian anatomist], is able to prove all, and certainly more than *Descartes* or *Mallbranche*; or all the rest proves nothing. The deists and christians too ought to content themselves with this observation, that, in the whole animal system, the same ends are come at by an infinite number of different ways and means, and all these the most exactly geometrical.²²

The fact that a perceived order in nature can play so central and explicit a role in two such dialectically opposed ideological currents is good reason to suppose that it is replete with fetishistic possibility and that what is being disavowed by the theistic side of the argument is the idea of nature as the product of a purely mechanistic force. New, Davies, and Day have good reasons to suppose that certain key passages in both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are framed with *Man a Machine* in mind: the incidents they identify as likely bearers of that influence are, for the most part, tinged with

²¹ The rhetorical thrust of *Man a Machine* is to persuade the reader to ‘throw off those prejudices in which you are fetter’d: assert your liberty, and arm yourself with the light of experience’ ([Julien Offray de La Mettrie], *Man a Machine: Translated from the French of the Marquiss D’Argens* (London: W. Owen, 1749), p. 83).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

theodictic implications.²³ These incidents include Walter's speculations on the location of the soul which shape his obstetric theory; Tristram's digression on sentimental exchange with that archetype of suffering nature, 'the poor ass'; the allusion to Alexander Pope depicted with a pained expression; and, most significantly of all, the repudiation of materialism in *A Sentimental Journey* and Yorick's assertion of the reality of the soul.²⁴

The fetish of continence

Both the quotation from Jenyns in its allusion to happiness and the preface to *Man a Machine* point towards the other fetish inherent in theodictic discourse most relevant to this enquiry — the metaphysical status of pleasure indicated by the fear of its excess:

[some represent *Man a Machine*] as a work, that had a tendency to subvert all order, encourage every vice, and in a word, destroy the essence of virtue itself.²⁵

The totemic status of the fear of excessive pleasure in this context is most famously exemplified for literary criticism in the reference by Richardson's fictional rake, Lovelace, referring to 'my worthy friend Mandeville's rule, *That private vices are public benefits*'.²⁶ But for Warburton — a figure of direct and explicit relevance to Sterne's fiction — the issue at stake in one of his most theodictic sermons is not only General Providence, natural order, and an almost Cartesian conception of the autonomous human soul, but the interpretation of natural disaster as a transcendent declaration of divine origin against passion, party, and pleasure:

A sincere, a speedy and a thorough reformation will not fail to avert the anger of the Lord, now gone out against the sinful inhabitants of the

²³ Melvyn New, Richard A. Davies, and W.G. Day, *Laurence Sterne: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, III (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), p. 193.

²⁴ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 173; II, p. 630; *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 151.

²⁵ *Man a Machine*, Preface.

²⁶ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 847.

earth [in the Lisbon earthquake]. I mean a reformation of the general manners, where each of us, in our several stations, may concur to heal the breaches made in our excellent constitution by our party-follies; to oppose the enormous progress of avarice and corruption; to check the wasting rage for pleasure and amusement; to shake off those unmanly luxuries crept into domestic life, some for the gratification of our appetites, but more for the display of our vanities.²⁷

The overlap in the meanings of ‘pleasure’ and ‘happiness’ that we see here was present in the milieu of Sterne’s fiction and the contest between the underlying conceptions — and the fetishistic possibilities implied by that contest — is similarly evident across some theological divides. For example, in a sermon of John Wesley’s on the Lisbon earthquake (in reference to an event that reportedly took place at Black Hambleton in North Yorkshire, not far from where Sterne lived and worked) the view seems to be taken that the seismic episode in question was a divine condemnation of Hambleton Races that took place close by, and that God ‘purposely chose such a Place, where there is so great a Concourse of Nobility and Gentry every Year’.²⁸ A suspicion of excess in pleasure is sprinkled over the whole sermon and at its heart is the following assertion, set in an explicitly theodictic context:

If you love GOD, then you are happy in GOD. If you love GOD, Riches, Honours, and the Pleasures of Sense, are no more to you than Bubbles on the Water: You look on Dress and Equipage as the Tassels of a Fool’s Cap; Diversions as the Bells on a Fool’s Coat. If you love GOD, GOD is in all your Thoughts, and your whole Life is a Sacrifice to Him.²⁹

As can be seen from the foregoing, the matrix from which the anxiety about the status of pleasure/happiness emerges is complicated, but its theodictic implications are

²⁷ W. Warburton, *Natural and Civil Events the Instruments of God’s Moral Government* (London: A. Millar and J. & R. Tonson, 1756), pp.13-14. This must be read with a caveat because the implications of terms like ‘happiness’ and ‘pleasure’ are neither unequivocal nor entirely equivalent. Those who, like Warburton, betray what appears to be a fear of ‘the wasting rage of pleasure’ and ‘unmanly luxuries’, often appeal explicitly to an ideological tradition with its roots in Aristotelianism and its distinction between what current English speakers would now call ‘pleasure’ as a sensation as distinct from the older denotation of ‘happiness’ as an activity fulfilling the inbuilt purposes of rational human nature.

²⁸ John Wesley, *Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Earthquake at Lisbon*, 6th edn (London: [n.pub], 1756), p. 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

commonly overlooked. The Epicurean Paradox, as its treatment develops in the milieu of Sterne's fiction, is not only a problem for theism in its attempt to establish the justifiability of suffering, it is also, in some instances, a problem of pleasure too — it is only necessary to revisit the quotation from Jenyns to see this. Jenyns places the whole burden of the justifiability of pain on the distribution of happiness: 'it is the happiness only, which we enjoy, or hope for, which can convince us of [God's] goodness'. However, one does not have to be an orthodox Lacanian to see that pleasure presents problems to physical well-being aside from the threats visible to common prudence.

The antinomy created in the dominant élite by the perception amongst some of pleasure as a threat — a threat both to social order and to the evolution of a culture of industriousness — and, on the other side, the Mandevillian perception of élite pleasures having a positive role in the development of consumerism (and the artisan and industrial skills that underpin it) is not difficult to see:

It is certain that the fewer Desires a Man has and the less he covets, the more easy he is to himself; the more active he is to supply his own Wants and the less he requires to be waited upon, the more he will be beloved and the less trouble he is in a Family; the more he loves Peace and Concord the more Charity he has for his Neighbour, and the more he shines in real Virtue, there is no doubt, but that in proportion he is acceptable to God and Man. But let us be Just, what Benefit can these things be of, or what earthly Good can they do, to promote the Wealth, the Glory and worldly Greatness of Nations? It is the sensual Courtier that sets no limits to his Luxury; the fickle Strumpet that invents New Fashions every Week; the haughty Duchess that in Equipage, Entertainments and all her Behaviour would imitate a Princess; the profuse Rake and lavish Heir, that scatter about their Money without Wit or Judgment, buy everything they see, and either destroy or give it away the next Day [...]: It is these [...] that we stand in need of [...] to have all the Variety of Labour perform'd, which the Skill of Men is capable of inventing in order to procure an honest Livelihood to the vast Multitudes of working Poor, that are required to make a large Society: And it is folly to imagine that Great and Wealthy Nations can subsist, and be at once Powerful and Polite without.³⁰

³⁰ [Bernard Mandeville,] *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 3rd edn (London: J. Tonson, 1724), pp. 410-11.

It may be argued on the basis of this passage that the anxiety that *The Fable of the Bees* so efficiently provoked was defined by the fact that there is an unresolvable paradox between an economic revolution partly driven by consumerism and the formal attempt of the same culture to promote values of moderate asceticism. But the fetishistic status of the theodictic preoccupation with pleasure goes further than an ideological hiatus between the benefits of continence and the benefits of consumerism. The quotation from Warburton indicates a fear of an unmanageable excess in pleasure that threatens to precipitate a cosmic revenge — ‘the anger of the Lord, now gone out against the sinful inhabitants of the earth’ — which takes this to the heart of the theodicy debate.

That these problems are lent a particular quality by their context is made visible once one compares them to representations of cosmic order and happiness in pre-Newtonian texts — or to texts that owe a greater debt to the pre-Newtonian mindset. An example of this is a poem by Wollaston, *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, published in 1691 at the dawn of Newtonianism (long before the text so germane to ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*). Although it asserts the idea that experience is indecipherable, unlike Wollaston’s later work it is set firmly in a pre-Newtonian mindset:

For as the *golden chain* of Providence,
That *links* together various events
With various contrivance, forward tends
To reach God’s own inscrutable ends:
So does it guide Observers, that attend,
Up to that Heaven, from whence it does descend.
Here all things altering and unfaithful are;
All methods dark and intricate appear;
This raises our research to that degree,
That from its *soaring pinions* we can see
A World beyond this Worlds convexity;

Where Happiness is ever sure and true,
 And fully prov'd, presenting to the view
 The books of *Providence* and *Nature* too;
 Those books, which so perplexing to us now
 There *puny* Saints *unriddle and read through*.³¹

This presumes a ‘convexity’ to temporal experience — ‘all methods dark and intricate appear’ — and whose ‘Happiness’ is implicitly unsure and untrue. It presumes that explanations of presently ‘inscrutable’ ends which are beyond the scope of present human knowledge will be manifest to the ‘puniest’ of saints in the ‘World beyond this World’. Above all, it characterises causality not with an image of mathematically precise order and the architectonics of popular Newtonianism but with the far less geometric image of the ‘golden chain of Providence’. It also assumes an opacity to temporal experience that is more congenial to the passage from *The Religion of Nature Delineated* so relevant to ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’. If this line of argument has fetishistic possibilities, they are of a different character to those pre-eminent in the mainstream sixty years after the publication of *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes*.

Conclusions

Those later fetishes of theodictic discourse in the milieu of Sterne’s fiction — the appeal to order and the demand for continence — are partial sublimations of the anxiety that human life might not be subjected to a providential order guaranteed by a personal and supernatural power and that pleasure/pain has an unmanageable excess that needs to be contained by threats of supernaturally guaranteed sanctions.³² What is more, they stand in an ironic contrast to metaphysical justifications of suffering within the pale of

³¹ [William Wollaston], *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes: or, The Unreasonableness of Mens Restless Contentions for the Present Enjoyments* (London: James Knapton, 1691), pp. 105-6.

³² The same themes are at the heart of Lamb’s analysis of the pre-eminent biblical theodicy, the Book of Job, and its significance for eighteenth-century literature. He describes the Book of Job as ‘a story destructive not only of the connections which Job’s comforters (and perhaps many of his readers) expect to be binding causes to effects, but also of any verisimilitude which assumes an interpretable meaning or moral to be embedded in a representation of events’ (*The Rhetoric of Suffering*, p. 3).

orthodoxy that assert the indecipherability of subjective experience and the absence of absolute standards in evaluating happiness and suffering — like ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’. A fiction that devotes considerable attention to the impossibility of achieving an ordered account of causality in human life and that constantly teases its implied reader with *double entendres* so as to guarantee that the acknowledgement of illicit — and thus dangerous — pleasure is never wholly repressed could thus be argued to owe a debt to the same cultural current that brings to the surface the debate about theodicy. *Tristram Shandy* is this text *par excellence*. Furthermore, a preoccupation with the moral status of pleasure on the boundaries of the permissible is a significant feature of *A Sentimental Journey*.

Chapter 2: The literary mode of theodicy

The main preoccupations of theodicy are not limited to its technical, philosophical or theological mode — it is not wholly tied to the agenda set by the preachers and the religious controversialists. It also has a literary mode as *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man* amply shows.¹ The formal, technical theological and philosophical debates about theodicy in Sterne's context often focused on issues of free will, providence, and the need for a religious guarantee for morality. When fictional discourse represents the stoic attempt to re-imagine pain out of existence, or the idea that a total explanation can be found which justifies suffering, or envisions certain experiences (including the experience of suffering) as communications with transcendent significance addressed personally to subjects, all of these have a substantial theodictic import. The formal, technical theodictic agenda is present and visible in Sterne's fiction but the issues from the wider expression of the theodicy debate are also deeply embedded in it. Strangely enough, when these issues receive critical attention, they are very rarely set in a theodictic context.

There is a reason why theodicy in its literary mode does not always make explicit connections with its theological and philosophical modes, and this is because one of the most important aspects of the formal theodicy debate since Leibniz is its tendency to

¹ For example, Brean Hammond does not simply restrict his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* to its explicitly theological utterances, he breaks down the narrative into narratological phases whose implication is both spiritual and theodictic, i.e. 'Disobedience, Slavery, Solitude, Faith, Doubt, and Deliverance' (Brean S. Hammond, "'The Print of a Man's Naked Foot': Do-It-Yourself Theodicy in Robinson Crusoe", in *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man: Literature and Theodicy*, ed. by Freiburg and Gruss, pp. 131-52 (p. 133)). Likewise Flavio Gregori's analysis of *Gulliver's Travels* leads to the theodictic conclusion that, 'Swift exposes Man's scandal, the threshold between humanity and inhumanity: he shows Man's evil side in all its grimy splendour, and leaves the door open to Man's understanding without ever showing the way' (Flavio Gregori, 'Gulliver's Myopic Reformation: Reason and Evil in *Gulliver's Travels*', in *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man: Literature and Theodicy* ed. by Freiburg and Gruss, pp. 181-203 (p. 202)).

devote almost no attention to the character of suffering as a function of narrative. In other words, rather than trying to conceptualise suffering in terms of its place in a sequence of events (e.g. 'Job experienced terrible loss, bereavement, and illness only to have his sufferings made good by later blessings'), formal theodicy tends to explain it in terms of intrinsic meaning (e.g. the classic, Augustinian formulation, 'evil has no positive nature; what we call evil is merely the lack of something that is good'²). There are specifically cultural reasons for this: in the Western European context, classic theodicy tends to owe a great debt to that very same Augustinian tradition which, despite its basis in the narrative of the Fall, tends to analyse evil as a category. Leibniz's own approach inevitably owes something to this tradition. Despite this, outside the bounds of formal theodicy, the way that religious believers and their detractors narrativise suffering is a crucial component in the process of its signification. The connection between narrative practice and theodicy is both vital and under-examined both by theologians and by literary criticism.

From the outset, it is worth emphasising the indisputable fact that Sterne's fictions point towards an intermittent awareness of the limits of empirical narrative in representing subjectivity. Some of the older ideologies, less troubled by the problem that unjustifiable suffering posed for theism, depended to an extent on the assumption that the desires and actions that shape consciousness could, in great measure, be confidently related to universal types and thus capable of rendition in a coherent, narrative form. One of the copy texts for this manoeuvre in fictional (and spiritual) discourse is undoubtedly *The Pilgrim's Progress* in which the reader is invited to measure herself against certain general natures — 'Valiant for Truth', 'Worldly Wiseman', 'Formalist',

² Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh and others, ed. by Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Image, 1958), p. 217.

and the like. Along with *Candide* and Montaigne's *Essays*, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the texts with which Tristram compares his own literary attempts: the contrast, of course between his product and *The Pilgrim's Progress* could not be more marked.

This matters because the task of theodicy presumes the ability to measure moral accountability. To say, 'I suffer unjustly', one must first be able to give an account of one's relative innocence. Fictions such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* purport to make that task fairly transparent. By contrast, Sterne's fiction fails to do this because it questions moral accountability itself in its most fundamental form: the task of giving an account. At the heart of this is the ideological kinship of the fictions to *neo-Stoicism* (which I define as 'adaptations of classical, ancient Stoic philosophy in the context of Sterne's fiction'). Neo-Stoicism matters because of its assertion that subjects can control their perception of suffering and that a key component in that process involves the activity of narrativising: when Phutatorius tries to make sense of the pain in his groin caused by the hot chestnut, he creates a narrative in which he imagines that a lizard has somehow crept into his open flap and fixed its teeth onto his penis.³

The application of three more theoretical tools from Žižek can yield a particularly rich harvest in elucidating the manifestation of contextual theodictic discourse in Sterne's fiction: the concepts of *the subject supposed to know*, *surplus enjoyment*, and the multifaceted metaphor of *the letter always arrives at its destination*.⁴ Readerly assumptions of the existence of authorial omniscience in the experience of reading fiction (*the subject supposed to know*); of being made aware of an unmanageable excess in experience that is beyond representation (*surplus enjoyment*); and the transignification of apparently arbitrary events (*the letter always arrives at its destination*) all point towards major

³ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 382.

⁴ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 222; *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 82; *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 17 and p. 12.

components in theodictic discourse and all of them play a significant role in the formation of Sterne's fiction.⁵ What is more, one of the central illustrations of the fetishistic disavowal of an excessive and incommunicable dimension to experience is found in the literary sentimental representation of the finely attuned sensibility that can access a dimension of meaning denied to less gifted subjectivities. One of the more significant manifestations of this is in the representation of Yorick's reaction to the starling in *A Sentimental Journey*.⁶

Neo-Stoicism and sentimentalism

One significant consequence of identifying the debt that Sterne's fiction seems to owe to Wollaston is that it quickly invites comparison with the better documented manifestations in the texts of more dominant and more readily identifiable ideological positions: Lockean psychology, Newtonian physiology, La Mettrian materialism, neo-Stoic epistemology, and the emerging ideologies of sentimentalism. One of the questions at the heart of the exchange between these positions is so simple and so important, that it is easy to overlook: when confronted by the same phenomenon, do subjects have a fundamentally similar experience of it?⁷ If shared experience is possible then the authority of that experience will be considerable. If it is not, then the threat of

⁵ The tendency of these categories at first sight seems to point in the direction of a postmodern rather than a Žižek-Lacanian approach. However, there is an inevitable flavour of the Cretan Paradox about such readings ('Nothing is ultimately true — including the assertion that 'nothing is ultimately true'') as Hugo De Rijke tends to exemplify. De Rijke argues that *Tristram Shandy* is written to demonstrate that its meaning is in the mind of the reader and is an affirmation of the 'ultimate resignation of authority and legitimacy of readership'. However, how can this message be unequivocally or authoritatively conveyed by an author who 'ultimately resigns authority'? (Hugo de Rijke, 'The Point of Long Noses: *Tristram Shandy* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*', in *Nose Book: Representations of the Nose in Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Victoria de Rijke and others (London: Middlesex University Press, 2000), pp. 54–75 (p. 64)).

⁶ A detailed analysis of this incident is given in Chapter 2 below, pp. 51–57.

⁷ Price is right to identify the significance of this question for the epistemology of the time (John Vladimir Price, 'Religion and Ideas', in *The Context of English Literature: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Pat Rogers (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 120–152 (p. 149)).

solipsism or epistemological chaos emerges which is, among other things, one of the anxieties partially repressed by the fetish of order.

The question of the possibility of shared perceptions sparks off a sequence of urgent questions which were highly contested in the dominant philosophical and theological ideologies of Sterne's time. Does the phenomenon carry its shape within itself or is it shaped by an innate, common nature shared by the perceivers? Is that experience capable of interpretation? Is that common experience communicable? Above all, for the purposes of literary criticism, can that experience be reliably represented in fiction?⁸ A clue to the existential significance of this is to be found in Montaigne's essay, 'That the Relish of Good, and Evils, Does In Great Measure Depend Upon the Opinion We Have of Them', where he states that:

If the original being of those things we fear, had power to lodge themselves in us, by their own authority, it would then lodge it self alike, and in like manner in all; for Men are all of the same kind, and saving in greater, and less proportions, are all provided with the same utensils and instruments to conceive and to judge; but the diversity of opinions we have of those things, does clearly evidence, that they only enter us by composition.⁹

Montaigne is saying, of course, that the same objects in external reality produce widely differing responses in the minds of perceivers and by saying that they 'enter by composition' (i.e. by a process of negotiation and synthesis), he is suggesting that the way they are represented in the mind is to an extent shaped by choice.

⁸ A good overview of the eighteenth-century debate over these questions can be found in Thomas Reid's account of sensation and perception first published in 1785 which argues against a number of established philosophical and medical theories, that 'The information of the senses is as perfect, and gives as full conviction, to the most ignorant as to the most learned' (Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. by James Walker (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1855; repr. [n.p]: Michigan Historical Reprint Series, [n.d.]), p. 63).

⁹ [Michel de Montaigne], *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne*, trans. by Charles Cotton, 2 vols (London: T. Basset, M. Gilliflower, and W. Hensman, 1685), 1, p. 460.

The significance of this quotation for the relationship between Sterne's fiction and the theodicy debate can hardly be overstated. Montaigne's essay opens with the same quotation from the *Enchiridion* of the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, as that on the frontispiece of Volume I of *Tristram Shandy* — 'MEN (says an ancient *Greek* Sentence) are tormented with the Opinions they have of Things, and not by the Things themselves' — with the implication that the title of the book, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, is at least partly rooted both in this essay and Epictetus.¹⁰ This in turn shows evidence of an almost explicit, dialogic relationship with the 'The Relish of Good and Evils' whose title gives a reliable indication of the content of the essay: it is about the interpretation of suffering. That this has an explicitly theodictic reference in Epictetus is found in the very first page of the *Enchiridion*:

Remember then, that, if you suppose Things by Nature slavish, to be free; and what belongs to others, your own; you will be hindered; you will lament; you will be disturbed; you will find fault both with Gods and Men.¹¹

This comes in the wake of defining 'Opinion' as one of the things 'in our power'. In other words, it implies that 'Opinion' when rightly adjusted will diminish the possibility of 'find[ing] fault with Gods and Men'.

If experience is mediated by subjects themselves, and thus potentially variable and arbitrary, then the theodictic implications for this position in the context of Sterne's fiction start to emerge with the confluence of different currents in that milieu. Firstly, various aspects of nascent sentimentalist ideology, in common with other culturally constitutive elements in the milieu of Sterne's fiction, often postulated the existence of a

¹⁰ Ibid., I, p. 459.

¹¹ Epictetus, p. 387.

universal semiotics of emotion which, in turn, implied that affect has an established vocabulary all of its own and is therefore thoroughly communicable.¹² Secondly, there is the ethical/epistemological position of neo-Stoicism as it bears on Sterne's fiction, so clearly expounded by Brian Michael Norton in his superb analysis of the dependence of *Tristram Shandy* on the context of its title quotation from Epictetus — and Montaigne's, 'The Relish of Good and Evils'.¹³ The importance of Montaigne's essay as a telltale for the influence on Sterne's fiction of contemporaneous debates about the significance of suffering is so great that it needs to be clarified before going any further.

Montaigne's essay gives a qualified assent to the classical Stoic position and locates the distinctively human vulnerability to suffering in the imagination:

'Tis plain enough to be seen, that 'tis the sharpness of our Conceit, that gives the Edg [*sic*] to our Pains and Pleasures. Beasts that have no such thing, leave to their bodies their own free and natural Sentiments [...]. But seeing we have Enfranchis'd ourselves [...] to give our selves up to the rambling Liberty of our own Fancies, let us at least help to encline them to the most agreeable side.¹⁴

Norton rightly argues that classic and neo-Stoic epistemology in Sterne's context is central to its ethics: if its version of the idea that experience is mediated (i.e. not *immediate*) is correct, this implies that the subject is endowed with the ability to detach herself from external events, even of the kind that generally involve intense suffering. 'The Relish of Good and Evils' includes a gruesome catalogue of eye-witness accounts of public torture and execution undergone by victims who manifested relatively few

¹² Price, 'Religion and Ideas', p. 149; Barker-Benfield, p. 170. The business of interpreting the physiological signals of emotion is a recurrent theme in Sterne's fiction. Perhaps the most notable example is the description of Widow Wadman's response in a sequence of blushes and glances towards the door to uncle Toby's undertaking to show her the exact spot where he received his wound in the groin at the siege of Namur (*Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 772).

¹³ Brian Michael Norton, 'The Moral in Phutatorius's Breeches: *Tristram Shandy* and the Limits of Stoic Ethics', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 18 (2006), 405-23 (p. 410); New, *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, p. 37.

¹⁴ I, pp. 474-75.

symptoms of pain.¹⁵ In other words, if it is possible that the same torture inspires agony and abject fear in some victims but leaves others relatively untroubled, it follows that suffering is not caused by anything innate in external events, but is wholly dependent on subjective attitudes to events. As Epictetus defines it: ‘Say to every harsh Appearance, “You are But an Appearance, and not absolutely the Thing you appear to be” ’.¹⁶

Norton summarises the neo-Stoic point of view in the formula,

we cannot control external events and circumstances themselves, we can control what we do with our impressions of those events and circumstances.¹⁷

However, Norton quite plausibly suggests that Sterne’s fiction constructs the neo-Stoic attitude as unsustainable in the case of physical suffering — as exemplified by Phutatorius’s reaction to the injury to his penis caused by the hot chestnut: ‘Sterne [...] is deeply sceptical that our mental processes are completely in our power’.¹⁸

None of this changes the fact that the conflicting ideologies of neo-Stoicism and emergent sentimentalism both attribute to the understanding and communication of suffering a privileged, if contested position in their moral and psychological paradigms. The fact that sentimentalism gives a special status to sympathy and compassion is indisputable but this should not blind one to the fact that, despite the provisionality of their accounts in sentimental fiction, *sympathy* and *compassion*, even at the etymological level, assume the possibility that the suffering of others is apprehensible because they both imply ‘to suffer with’.¹⁹ More significantly for theodicy, this implies that suffering is at least partially legible. In Sterne’s fiction there is an intermittent (but highly significant) preoccupation with the interpretation of visible manifestations of affect and a substantial

¹⁵ Ibid., I, pp. 461-63.

¹⁶ Epictetus, p. 388.

¹⁷ Norton, p. 412.

¹⁸ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 381-83; Norton, p. 420.

¹⁹ The foundational status of sympathy in sentimentalism is indicated by the fact that it is the topic of Chapter 1 of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

volume of material is taken up with representations of empathy. These facts alone provide good *prima facie* evidence of the potential fruitfulness of these questions. Significant telltales of their theodictic character will be found in anything that sets out to throw doubt on the reliability of accounts of simple, sensory experience: how can one attribute transcendent meaning to unreliable data? That, after all, is one of the implications of the use of Wollaston in ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’.²⁰ It is also a significant feature of the fictions.

Tristram Shandy is manifestly preoccupied with the three way relationship between textual representations in general, fictional representations in particular, and the phenomena they both purport to represent. However, in itself, this issue is categorically distinct from the question of the reliability of spontaneous sensory experience for an accurate apprehension of the phenomenal world: in other words, it is not immediately clear that *Tristram Shandy* constitutes a radical rejection of empirical epistemology *per se*. Nevertheless, significant ambiguities arise with implications that go far beyond the merely narratological, for example in the formal games played by the unfulfilled catalogues of projected chapters and Walter’s doomed project of writing a ‘Tristrapædia’ — itself a demonstration of the impossibility of trying to produce wisdom in anticipation of actual experience.²¹ It is hard to deny that the apparent rhetorical thrust of these devices is to expose the artificiality and selectivity of textual representation. It is epitomised by the frustrated plea uttered by Tristram when he argues that it might be necessary to devote a whole chapter to each step taken by Walter and Toby down the flight of stairs.²² What is more, it is not coincidental that the preceding episode is dominated by a discussion of the way in which subjects impute

²⁰ This has been discussed in detail in Chapter 1 above, pp. 24-26.

²¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 186, p. 335, p. 448.

²² *Ibid.*, I, p. 336.

religious meaning to suffering and then palliate it with humour: Walter speculates on the existence of a ‘hidden spring’ within the fragile human frame that enables it to survive ‘the sudden jerks and hard jostlings’ of life and Toby spontaneously asserts that the ‘spring’ in question is ‘Religion’.²³

At one level these incidents (coupled with the veneration that Tristram has for the narratologically over-circumspect archbishop of Benevento) explain why *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* contains a remarkably limited account either of the life or the opinions of Tristram Shandy.²⁴ They constitute a formal game in which ‘Life’ — biographical data — is too detailed to be fairly represented and whose mass is so great as to make impossible the articulation of ‘Opinion’. However, whatever the formal implications of the unfulfillable narratological demands may be, their implication for the whole question of the reliability of empirical representations of reality seems to be inescapable. Tristram complains that he has ‘enough already on my hands with [even attempting the Chapter of Chances]’ and that ‘by my great grandfather’s whiskers, I shall never get half of [the catalogue of chapters] through this year’.²⁵ All of this signals a hopelessly unmanageable surplus of fact and implication delivered by sensory experience that is not merely beyond the scope of textual representation to manage but for merely empirical purposes too.

It could be objected that Tristram is an incompetent narrator. However, it does not require any literary theory to postulate that a total representation of life is not even a theoretical possibility in the hands of even the most competent narrator — Tristram merely draws attention to this fact. It also has significant resonances for a Žižek-Lacanian approach. The evidence seems to suggest that, in predicating empirical

²³ Ibid., I, pp. 333-34.

²⁴ Ibid., I, p. 446.

²⁵ Ibid., I, p. 335.

experience as the generator of an unmanageable excess — and framing it in the context of theodictic discourse — the criticism of *Tristram Shandy* in particular can be enriched by the application of two further concepts from Žižek: *the subject supposed to know* and *surplus enjoyment*.

The subject supposed to know, and surplus enjoyment

In the Lacanian therapeutic process, the analysand initially assumes that *the subject supposed to know* (by which is meant ‘the one with a specialised knowledge of — and spontaneous insight into — the cause of the analysand’s symptoms’) is the analyst.²⁶ But the use of this concept by Lacanians is not limited to therapy: Žižek applies it as an exegetical tool to a number of fictions such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho*.²⁷ By trying to locate the position of the subject supposed to know in *Tristram Shandy* a key feature in the consumption of a huge proportion of canonical fiction is foregrounded: if there is a subject supposed to know, it is the author.

Tristram Shandy is absolutely explicit in its partly mischievous — and, given contemporaneous debates about sexual obscenity in the text, exculpatory — suggestion that it is not the case that the author is the subject supposed to know. In a way that is so appealing to any theoretical approach that questions the authorial control of meaning, it constructs the process of composition as something shared between the author and the reader:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; — so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s

²⁶ It is one of the therapeutic aims of Lacanian analysis to make the analysand realise that the subject supposed to know is in fact the analysand’s own subconscious (Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; repr. 1999), p. 30).

²⁷ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 222.

understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own.²⁸

It seems fair to assume that a significant proportion of the blanks that the text invites the reader to fill is libidinous. Its most explicit manifestation is in the blank page and its invitation to the reader to

paint [Widow Wadman] to your own mind — as like your mistress as you can — as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you [...] — please but your own fancy in it.²⁹

What is crucial about this, in theodictic terms, is that it renders problematic one of the key features of narrative practice: the assumption that, in the virtual arena of fictional discourse, omniscience can exist — and omniscience is, of course, the vanishing point that locates the subject supposed to know.³⁰

If a fetish can be defined as something that enables its consumer simultaneously to ‘know but not know’, then fiction is inalienably fetishistic *per se*: it commonly induces its consumers to report that they simultaneously know but do not know that they are reading fiction — what is sometimes referred to as *the willing suspension of disbelief*.³¹ If one of its key components is to give the reader a virtual experience of being guided by an omniscient presence — i.e. the author — even within the context of a first person narrative (because the author must be the subject supposed to know what even the persona of the narrator does not), then the explicit decentering of this process brings to

²⁸ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 125-26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 566-67.

³⁰ Eagleton takes a different view of the significance of authorial omniscience in *Tristram Shandy*: the narrator ‘must not pull rank on the reader [because it] would mean that he knew things which the reader did not, which would ruffle the equality between them’ (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 89).

³¹ The concept famously popularised by Coleridge (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* <<http://www.gutenberg.org>> [accessed 1 March 2010], Chapter XIV).

the margins of awareness a sense of the constructedness of that omniscience and thus its unreliability.

What is more, *Tristram Shandy* deliberately reveals this fetishising process in fiction: it allows the reader to know but not to know that there is no omniscient author — after all, neither the author nor the persona of the narrator can provide a picture of Widow Wadman according to its own stipulations. A fiction which hints at the abrogation of authorial omniscience is radically destabilising the reader's horizon of expectation which is often unconsciously shaped by the assumption that, within that horizon, there exists a sufficient explanation for the meaning of the text. By way of linking this to a theodictic undercurrent, it almost goes without saying that the postulate of divine omniscience is a central component of theistic apologetics: 'We may not understand the reason for our suffering, but there exists a mind (the ultimate subject who is supposed to know) that does understand and will one day explain'. *Tristram Shandy* suggests an experience of narrative where, in virtual terms, the reader's expectation of just such possibility is radically threatened. It leaves the reader at least partially aware of the absence of a subject supposed to know — and this is far from being a marginal feature of the fiction. However, the fact that this abrogation is also associated with the exculpatory suggestion that any obscenities are in the reader's mind points towards a traumatic and transgressive dimension to the libidinal forces hinted at.

As has already been suggested, the notion of *unmanageable excess* is an indirect index of the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* (which, if it is translated, is commonly rendered in English as 'enjoyment'). In Lacanian terms, at the heart of the management of *jouissance* is a process whereby the subject is deprived of her pre-symbolic, unmediated interaction with the world. This happens by virtue of being born into a symbolic network not of her own making — as all are when they acquire language. However,

there are fragments of that exchange that are not assimilated by the subject into her symbolised grasp of reality and those fragments are at the heart of the problematics of *jouissance*.³² And, because being thrust into the symbolic network involves a renunciation of unmediated interaction with the world, renunciation itself becomes a feature of *surplus enjoyment*. This fact also hints at the deliberately ambiguous denotation of ‘enjoyment’ in the Lacanian usage — the subtext in French of *jouir* as a term for achieving orgasm and its Lacanian overlay of an experience so intense and unmanageable as to be an object of anxiety and a source of danger and pain.

The concept of surplus enjoyment (*plus de jouir*) is slightly slippery in Žižek’s hands. At the heart of this concept is the suggestion that there is an absence, a lack, in the symbolic order in which the subject finds herself. Surplus enjoyment is a characteristic of the objects that come into that space and stand for the missing, unattainable enjoyment. It is also the characteristic of such objects that they become the focus of repeated attention because they are the closest the subject believes she can get to the real enjoyment. One analogy for it might be the Wildean formula for a cigarette as

the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?³³

The Sublime Object of Ideology gives the most totemic explanation of surplus enjoyment in its analysis of the fascist psychological dynamic in which the authoritarian demand that the people sacrifices its enjoyments (such as better wages, shorter working hours) stimulates the enjoyment of sacrifice *per se*.³⁴ In other words, accepting the pay freeze is

³² Fink says that the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* ‘means [...] that immediate discharge has become bridled by symbolic means: by the child’s assimilation or internalization of the parents’ (that is, the Other’s) admonitions, values, prohibitions, and so on’ (Fink, p. 226).

³³ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 17-167 (p. 70).

³⁴ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 82.

not done for any supposed economic benefit but simply to get the pleasure of heroic renunciation. Žižek also gives the rather persuasive example of caffeine-free diet Coke — a drink that has absolutely no nutritional value, is neither bitter nor sweet, is shorn of the flavour that it would otherwise derive from the caffeine, and, by stimulating the desire to drink, apparently does not effectively quench thirst.³⁵ It is in this sense a drink that renounces all of the normal pleasures of drinking.

At first sight, the principal relevance of the concept of surplus enjoyment when applied to Sterne's fiction would seem to be almost exclusively sexual — the cascade of partially veiled *double entendres* drawing attention to a transgressive, forbidden, or lost dimension of literary representation. After all, it is a constant parade of hints at what may not be represented. However, *Tristram Shandy* is also a comic representation of unresolvable narrative dilemmas arising from an unmanageable surplus of sensory experience. It constructs the consequence of the Lockean demand that one should only accord certainty to evidence gathered by the senses as a way of inducing the comic enjoyment (*jouir*) of being overwhelmed by data and possibility. This only becomes clear when it is seen in relation to the theodictic question, i.e. when one entertains the possibility that the unfulfillable expectation raised by the symbolic system is a yearning for a transcendent explanation of experience that can be deciphered. This is close to — but not wholly identical with — a central theme in Lacan which is frequently relayed and commented upon and adapted by Žižek: 'the enigma of the Other's desire'.³⁶ In other words, the endlessly teasing and threatening possibility that the transcendent wants something of the subject but never wholly discloses it.

³⁵ *The Fragile Absolute*, pp. 19-20.

³⁶ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, p. 47.

If this is a possible reading of the text, then the comi-tragic character of Sterne's fiction, dominated by the sense of the hopelessly provisional nature of textual (i.e. symbolic) representation, and the ambiguous character of the pleasure with which narratives are charged becomes harder to ignore. If the endless lack of anything resembling a conventional plot in *Tristram Shandy* is designed to operate in the sphere of surplus enjoyment, then the lack in the symbolic order that it is rooted in is defined by the endlessly withheld possibility of an ordered narrative with an end and a purpose. Nor is the libidinal dimension of surplus enjoyment in Sterne's fiction irrelevant: it would be a mistake to overlook its link to the fetish of continence — the partially repressed fear of unmanageable and dangerous pleasure — that plays such an important part in contemporaneous theodictic discourse. In fact, its theodictic character seems to be, in Moglen's phrase, 'uncanny in its Lacanian presumptions'.³⁷

It is almost impossible to overemphasise the plausibility of the postulate that, in Sterne's fiction and its context, assertions of the narrowly empirical indecipherability of experience — above all, those that assume a failing explanatory paradigm — are perfectly positioned to have theodictic implications. The comedy of his fiction depends significantly on the ambiguous and almost transgressive pleasure of being denied the prospect of some kind of ultimate explanation. Such a deprivation is a clear example of an object that has become the focus of surplus enjoyment: the autobiography that does not explain the life story of the author sounds very similar to the drink that neither nourishes, gives substantial pleasure, nor quenches thirst — 'the perfect type of the perfect pleasure [that] leaves one unsatisfied'. The 'It' whose lack it depends on is the enjoyment that is transgressive because the Other will punish its unbridled indulgence

³⁷ Moglen, p. 13.

with earthquakes, and the nagging sense that there ought to be a coherent explanation of the shape of a human life and, implicitly, the purpose of its sufferings.

Yorick's starling and 'mechanical' stimuli for compassion

The postulate that sensory experience *per se* can be a generator of an unmanageable surplus resistant to interpretation represents one end of a spectrum of sceptical positions about the possibility of a reliable, empirical interpretation of subjectivity. Somewhere on the other end of that spectrum is its disavowal. If Sterne's fiction is fetishistic, then the simultaneous presence in the texts of an ideological position and its disavowed lie should come as no surprise.

One possible lie disavowed by the claim that there is an unrepresentable and indecipherable excess in sensory experience is the postulate, explicit in the ideology of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival, that the sensory apprehension of the feelings of others to the suitably attuned and spiritually gifted subjectivity is not only a potential bearer of communications from a transcendent reality but the fruit of a special, spiritual gift. In Lacanian terms, this constitutes the belief that it is possible for certain, specially gifted subjectivities, to decipher the demands of the big Other embodied in the symbolic order. A highly significant hint of this is found in one of John Wesley's sermons, 'The Witness of Our Own Spirit', as he contrasts the mindset of the subject before and after conversion:

the Joy of a Christian does not arise from any Blindness of Conscience, from his not being able to discern Good from Evil. So far from it, that he was an utter Stranger to this Joy, till the Eyes of his Understanding were open'd! that he knew it not, until he had Spiritual Senses, fitted to discern Good and Evil. [A] Christian has the most exquisite Sensibility; such as he could not have conceived before. He never had such a Tenderness of Conscience as he had, since the Love of God has reigned in his Heart.³⁸

³⁸ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 3 vols, 2nd edn (London: W. Bowyer, 1754), 1, pp. 219-20.

The idea that certain kinds of affect can be tokens of divine favour or communication is as much a repudiation of a confident, strictly materialist interpretation of reality claiming the possibility of ultimate explanations as the postulate of an unmanageable surplus generated by sensory experience. It is also not surprising that most of the data for the first kind of evidence comes from *A Sentimental Journey* whereas most of the data for the second comes from *Tristram Shandy* — including data with an explicit preoccupation with the theodicy debate.

Perhaps the incident whose implications for this aspect of the argument are clearest is the encounter between Yorick and the starling. Not only does this incident bring together almost explicitly theodictic allusions with issues of affect as a vehicle for purported contact with the transcendent, there are also respectable reasons to suppose that it is drawing on a subtext about the claims of materialist ideology informed by possible allusions to La Mettrie's, *Man a Machine*.³⁹ One of the indicators of this allusion is the bundling together of associations between *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Man a Machine*, and a speculation with apparent debts to both in *Tristram Shandy*. The three coalesce around a concept that has come to be known as *Locke's Parrot*.

'Locke's Parrot' is a shorthand reference to the discussion in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of the difference between human and animal identity which contains a third-hand report, received with a hint of scepticism, of an old, trained parrot in Brazil that seemed to have been capable of rational conversation.⁴⁰ It is not provable that there is a subtext linking Yorick's Starling with Locke's Parrot but it is certainly

³⁹ Parker coherently argues that Sterne's fiction betrays an anxiety about the possibility that sentimental sympathy may be nothing more than a mechanical response. For Parker, Trim's reflex piety in 1, pp. 468-71, is a parody of its mechanical form and a reaction against La Mettrian concepts of mechanistic materialism (*Scepticism and Literature*, pp. 204-5).

⁴⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols, 9th edn (London: A. Churchill and Edm. Parker, 1726), 1, pp. 284-86.

possible given that New has respectable reasons to surmise that *Tristram Shandy* may allude to a passage in La Mettrie that refers to Locke's Parrot.⁴¹ This gives plausible grounds for believing that there is an intertextual link between the incident with the starling in *A Sentimental Journey* and a well established debate in the cultural élite about the reality of the soul that is bundled in with the allusion to Locke's Parrot.⁴² All of this suggests that the incident needs some closer analysis.

Yorick is as misdirected by the starling's 'mechanical' plea of 'I can't get out' as 'the Author of great Note' from whom *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* sources the story about the parrot — Locke qualifies the anecdote by saying that it gives grounds 'sufficient to countenance the Supposition of a rational *Parrot*'.⁴³ The misdirection effected on Yorick by the starling is, notably enough, a response of compassion that then develops into a quasi-religious reverie.

I vow, I never had my affections more tenderly awakened; or do I remember an incident in my life, where the dissipated spirits, to which my reason had been a bubble, were so suddenly call'd home. Mechanical as the notes were, yet so true in tune to nature were they chanted, that in one moment they overthrew all my systematic reasonings upon the Bastile; and I heavily walk'd up stairs, unsaying every word I had said in going down them [i.e. his previously held, neo-Stoic belief that even the innocent can emerge from wrongful imprisonment 'a better and wiser man than he went in' if he has a mind to it].

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery! [...] Gracious heaven! cried I, kneeling down upon the last step but one in my ascent — grant me but health, thou great Bestower of it, and give me but this fair goddess [Liberty] as my companion — and shower down thy mitres, if it seems good unto thy divine providence, upon the heads which are aching for them.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 630; New, *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, pp. 487-88. The symbolism of birds as vehicles for philosophical and spiritual meaning is not limited to Locke's parrot or Yorick's starling — there is also a discussion in Epictetus of the validity of treating as a portent the 'croak' of a raven. It is not impossible that this is also a subtext in this incident, but it is far from provable (*Enchiridion*, p. 394).

⁴² It is worth noting that Moglen, writing from a feminist and a psychoanalytic perspective, argues that *Tristram Shandy* constitutes an 'ironic interrogation of Locke' (Moglen, p. 89).

⁴³ I, pp. 284-86.

⁴⁴ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 95-96.

The ideological credentials of this empathic, anti-despotic, and anti-slavery response are — from a progressive, English, bourgeois perspective — nearly impeccable.⁴⁵ From the moment that Yorick takes on board the symbolic import of the starling's plea, it seems as if the text is rendering an exemplary transition from appropriate affect to the equally appropriate political/religious response.

However, the enormously ambiguous ethical implication of the incident has a curiously theodictic and metafictional significance. The intercession for health and the plea to providence are, of course, the stuff of which theodicy is commonly made. Furthermore, the fact that the ambiguities of the incident are not far from the surface of the text gives good reason to suppose that this is another instance of fetishistic disavowal: the signalling of a simultaneously knowing-but-not-knowing response to a question of apparently unjustifiable suffering.⁴⁶ This becomes clearer when a connection is made between the closing reverie in this incident with the rationalisation for which it is almost explicitly a proxy. It becomes even more explicit if the satirical aside that is injected into the evolution of the otherwise authorised, purportedly sincere, sentimental response is foregrounded. The apostrophe to the 'goddess of Liberty' is succeeded by the apparently more pious address to the more authorised deity — 'Gracious Heaven' — accompanied

⁴⁵ They are also entirely incompatible with the Stoic ideology embodied in the *Enchiridion* for which the desire for health and political liberty is something that enslaves the subject in the grip of things not in her power — 'Body' and 'Command' are two of the things that are listed from the outset as examples of things 'not in our Power' and to which it is foolish to be a slave (Epictetus, p. 387).

⁴⁶ There is also good reason to suppose that the incident with its concerns about physical imprisonment and constraint as a result of illness can be read as a commentary upon — perhaps even a disproof of — the Stoic ideas underlying the quotation from Epictetus that is so significant for *Tristram Shandy*. As already quoted, the *Enchiridion* argues that one's 'Body, Property, [and] Command' are 'not in our Power' and if one '[supposes] what belongs to others such as it really is; no one will ever compell you; no one will ever restrain you' (*Enchiridion*, p. 387). On sickness, the *Enchiridion* says, 'Sickness is an Impediment to the Body, but not to the Faculty of Choice, unless it pleases. Lameness is an impediment to the Leg, but not to the Faculty of Choice: and say this to yourself with regard to every thing that happens' (*Enchiridion*, p. 391).

by a bathetic plea for a guarantee of Yorick's own liberty as part of a bargain in which he will sacrifice his own ecclesiastical ambition: it is the presence of this satirical bathos (the sideswipe at 'heads aching for mitres') at the end of a sentimental reverie that is the most significant indicator of the merely partial sublimation of an ideological disavowal and provides a vital clue that unravels the preceding process of association.

Firstly, Yorick signals (in more formal, less apparently ironic tones) his awareness that he is responding to a purely 'mechanical' stimulus: the bird is wholly unaware of the denotation of its mimed utterance or of the fact that it signals what is probably its own instinctive desire — just as much as a textual, fictional representation of suffering is purely mechanical (which is a good ground for believing that this passage has a metafictional implication as well).⁴⁷ Secondly, it seems as though the response to the caged bird creates a marked shift in the direction of the significance bestowed by Yorick on the 'Bastile' [*sic*] and those things for which it is established as a metonym: imprisonment for ideological transgression and physical confinement in general. From rationalisations involving a reference to 'gouty' constitutions and victims of 'some tyrant of a distemper', Yorick is galvanised into an almost Ignatian exercise in the imaginative composition of place and a luxuriant compassion for a purely imaginary prisoner in the Bastile.

This may well be another instance of the text theodictically eliciting surplus enjoyment: the mechanical call of the starling seems to operate as a kind of fulcrum 'which overthrew all my systematic reasonings upon the Bastile'. The shift is from an attempt to rationalise the limitations created by physical suffering such as gout or 'distemper' on the one hand and an apostrophe to Liberty on the other. It seems as if the

⁴⁷ It is not impossible that, like the incident with the dead ass (pp. 53-54) this has implications for the significance of animal suffering. However, this lies slightly beyond the remit of this thesis (see Introduction above, p. 5, n. 13).

apostrophe to Liberty is overthrowing a mechanism that Yorick has devised to ‘reduce to their proper size and hue [...] the evils of life’ — and this is the point at which the partially repressed theodictic implication becomes more visible in this quasi-religious use of affect as a bearer of a conventional communication of grace.⁴⁸

All of this is reinforced by the fact that, on the margins of the textual moment, there is a solidly metafictional reference: Yorick’s initial rationalisation of suffering is designed as a repudiation of ‘the sombre pencil’ which is evidently a synecdoche for the activity of representation-by-drawing of a gloomy world view that cannot make good ‘the evils of life’.⁴⁹ After all, Yorick is effectively engaging in a thought experiment in which the reader is invited simply to erase from consciousness the image of a physical prison and, much in the manner of a neo-Stoic manipulation of subjectivity, to imagine himself being given the opportunity for self-improvement with ‘pen and ink, and paper, and patience’ and emerge from the experience ‘a better and wiser man than he went in’.⁵⁰

Not only does this attract the speculation that the task of textual representation is being posited as a palliative, its capacity for fetishistic disavowal is strengthened by the fact that a conventional Christian could claim without much effort that this kind of meditation is in accordance with New Testament prescriptions about the potential of suffering to improve character.⁵¹ But, crucially, if this shift from the rationalisation of personal suffering as a potentially improving experience to the sentimental polemic against despotism consists in the latter standing partly as a proxy for the inadequacy of the former, then the significance of this far from marginal moment in the text as a

⁴⁸ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Romans 5.3-5.

representation with theodictic import has suffered serious critical neglect. Tristram would, perhaps, be alert to the association of ideas underlying the themes on either side of the fulcrum of the starling's call — and even Yorick's awareness of the ecclesiastical ambition of fellow clergy is about thwarted personal ambition (which also has theodictic implications) and is far from being simply about political considerations.

However, the full theodictic implications of the idea of experiences as communications from the transcendent are, in Lacanian terms, incomplete without some reference to the concept of 'the letter always arrives at its destination' as developed by Žižek.⁵² The theoretical trigger which tends to be overlooked in modern critical analyses is in the suffering involved in the inversion of Phutatorius's own doctrinal position — i.e the apparent permissibility of the traffic of clergy with concubines — when it becomes, in symbolic terms, a self-inflicted wound: it hints at the formulation offered to Lacan by one of his 'most acute auditors' that 'Human language [constitutes] a kind of communication in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form'.⁵³

'The letter always arrives at its destination'

In Žižek's hands, the concept of the letter always arriving at its destination is used in different modes. Two of those modes are of considerable hermeneutic value and both are elaborations of the idea that the subject's symbolic grasp of phenomenal existence involves a misrecognition both of the scope and nature of agency and of events both internal and external to herself. It is that combination of something that relates both to fatalism and to the code with which subjects try to interpret experience that, if this

⁵² Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 6-48 (p. 30).

⁵³ 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits*, pp. 237-68 (p. 246).

approach has viability, renders more explicit the representation of agency in Sterne's fiction as a co-symptom of the theodicy debate. In one of the modes of 'the letter always arrives at its destination', Žižek uses the Althusserian idea of the subject's tendency to (mis)recognise herself as the 'addressee of ideological interpellation'. In the second mode, Žižek uses what Lacan labels as 'the return of the repressed'.⁵⁴ These concepts need to be expounded in the sense that they are relevant to this enquiry before they can be applied.

In Žižek's *first mode of 'the letter always arrives at its destination'*, what is implied is the tendency of the subject to assume that an identification that is thrust upon her has been designed with her in mind. To illustrate this, one of the examples that Žižek gives is taken from *The Arabian Nights*:

the hero, lost in the desert, quite by chance enters a cave; there he finds three old wise men, awoken by his entry, who say to him: 'Finally, you have arrived! We have been waiting for you for the last three hundred years,' as if, behind the contingencies of his life, there was a hidden hand of fate which directed him toward the cave in the desert. This illusion is produced by a kind of "short circuit" between a place in the symbolic network and the contingent element which occupies it: *whosoever* finds himself at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself at this place.⁵⁵

Žižek goes on to emphasise the performative nature of 'the letter always arrives at its destination' in this mode and, most crucially of all, the way in which the subject misrecognises the arbitrary signifier as the fulfilment of a preordained fate: the letter was not actually addressed to the subject before she received it, she 'becomes its addressee the moment [she recognises herself] in it'.⁵⁶ This has huge implications for the critical analysis of texts but, as far as literature's theodictic mode is concerned, it is the capacity

⁵⁴ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 17 and p. 12; Lacan, 'Variations on the Standard Treatment', in *Écrits*, pp. 269-302 (p. 297).

⁵⁵ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

of the letter always to arrive at its destination — i.e. to reveal the potential that inheres within signifiers for conjuring up the sense of fate and preordained purpose — that is pre-eminently important.

To an extent almost unique in canonical fiction, *Tristram Shandy* explicitly plays with the way in which readers are interpellated by fictions — it mimics with an uncanny prescience the process by which gaps in the symbolic network can be made explicit. A significant minority of the text is devoted to such unfilled spaces in the asides addressed to ‘Sir’ and ‘Madam’ (among others).⁵⁷ However, on its own this does not have any notable theodictic implications partly because it depends on the more decisive fact that the most significant interpellations effected by fictional discourse are not routinely achieved by explicit forms of address but by the reader’s identifications and the engagement of her ideological commitments.

In *Tristram Shandy*, one of the more explicit depictions and satires on the process of interpellation and (mis)recognition is the recitation of ‘The Abuses of Conscience’ whose author is not identified either to its fictional consumers nor, in the earliest stages of the publication of the book itself, to the actual early readership. This fact alone suggests a deliberate attempt to court (mis)recognition in the use of the sermon initially delivered by Sterne himself as an Assize Sermon on 29 July 1750, republished in *Tristram Shandy* attributed to Yorick who is, in turn, unrecognised by Trim, Walter, and Toby, all in anticipation of the sermon’s later republication in a volume of sermons under Sterne’s name.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Benedict gives a coherent account of the significance of these asides but, for perfectly valid reasons, does not consider any theodictic implications (Barbara M. Benedict, ‘“Dear Madam”: Rhetoric, Cultural Politics and the Female Reader in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*’, *SP*, 89 (1992), 485-98).

⁵⁸ New, *Sermons of Laurence Sterne: The Notes*, p. 284.

The appropriation of gaps in the symbolic network as mediated through the sermon is made visible as its apparent import is gradually decimated by the crossfire of arbitrary identifications, most notably in Trim's insistence that his brother, Tom, must have been the specific individual that the author of the sermon had in mind when reference is made to a hypothetical prisoner of the Inquisition. It culminates with Trim reacting to the description of the prisoner being tortured on the rack as if it were a literal account of Tom's situation. Walter has taken over the reading and the sermon continues:

Consider the nature of the posture in which [the prisoner] now lies stretch'd, — what exquisite tortures he endures by it! — 'Tis all nature can bear! Good God! See how it keeps his weary soul hanging upon his trembling lips, — willing to take its leave, — but not suffered to depart! Behold the unhappy wretch led back to his cell! (Then, thank God, however, quoth *Trim*, they have not killed [my brother Tom]) — See him dragg'd out of it again to meet the flames, and the insults in his last agonies, which this principle, — this principle, that there can be religion without mercy, has prepared for him. (Then, thank God, — he is dead, quoth *Trim*, — he is out of his pain, — and they have done their worst at him. — O Sirs! — Hold your peace, *Trim*, said my father, going on with the sermon, lest *Trim* should incense Dr. *Slop*, — we shall never have done at this rate.)⁵⁹

It is not wholly coincidental that this nearly textbook example of the first mode of the letter always arriving at its destination concerns a description of intense human suffering and the imputation of moral evil — nor that it is embedded within folds of irony that make this also capable of being read as an intensely comic incident, itself a function of the arbitrariness of the signifier in Lacan's sense of the term.

In the historical and ideological context, the manner in which the arbitrariness of signifiers is hinted at in a homiletic account of human suffering, accumulating as it does layers of comic irony, has a theodictic implication that is almost undeniable. What is more, this process is not far from the surface of the text: it does not require an

⁵⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 163.

especially sophisticated reading to detect an invitation to the reader to laugh at the account of the tortured prisoner of the Inquisition — should the reader choose to make an identification in which she plays the detached observer of the construct rather than the recipient of the sermon's import. Crucially, what is happening in the text is the partially sublimated suggestion of the arbitrariness as signifiers of representations of experience rather than an assertion of their fixed meaning as signs within a plan underpinned by a transcendental guarantee — it is out of exactly the same fabric that theodictic discourse is made. But another process is also being foregrounded here: the attempt to deconstruct the means whereby readerly identifications with a fiction become an integral aspect of what MacKay calls, 'the bogus coherence of the closed and consolatory novel'.⁶⁰ The key term here, of course, is 'consolatory'.⁶¹

A central function of the legacy of the Newtonian revolution was the extent to which it legitimised the conceptualisation of the cosmos as a mathematical and mechanical perfection.⁶² By marked contrast, the ideological temper of pre-Newtonian English Christianity — as texts such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Wollaston's *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes* show — involved the believer in grappling with a God whose ways were 'inscrutable' or which were dependent on interventions often effected through personal encounters in which roles such as those symbolised by the Evangelist or the Interpreter in *The Pilgrim's Progress* or a direct, personal revelation act as

⁶⁰ Marina MacKay, 'Catholicism, Character, and the Invention of the Liberal Novel Tradition', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48 (2002), 215-238 (p. 230).

⁶¹ In one of the very few critical treatments of Sterne's fiction that comes close to dealing with its theodictic aspects (it devotes considerable attention to the significance of the Book of Job in Sterne's preaching and fiction), Lamb's excellent analysis of the equivocal approach to suffering in *Tristram Shandy* draws attention to the arbitrariness of signifiers. However, he argues that *Tristram Shandy* represents some catastrophes that seem to have a capacity to baffle language: 'Time and again in Shandean crises, words of comfort fail to touch the affection of grief they are meant to eradicate' (*Sterne's Fiction and the Double Principle*, p. 15).

⁶² See Chapter 1 above, pp. 27-28.

messengers.⁶³ By contrast, Newtonianism gave an enormous boost to the cause of Natural Theology, i.e. insights notionally available to any unbiased, rational observer into the character and purposes of God discernible by an observation of nature as opposed to insights wholly dependent on direct, personal revelation from God.

As a crucial part of the privileging of Natural Theology, the role of prayer and personal revelation is significantly downgraded. What is being inevitably lost here is precisely that kind of experience that interpellates the subject in the manner of the first mode of the letter always arriving at its destination, i.e. the kind of mindset that enables the subject to think of herself as the recipient of a personal identity and role designated by God. Fiction, both in the context of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* and even more intensely in the ‘closed and consolatory novel’, does not give a direct substitute for this deprivation, but it does create space for subjective identifications of a quasi-religious character through its availability for a licensed and explicit process of the (mis)recognition as the addressee of interpellation. But interpellation is not the only process in operation: sometimes subjectivities are identified by the manifestation of their own unacknowledged and half-formed wishes.

In *the second mode of the letter always arrives at its destination*, Žižek describes the phenomenon of ‘the subject being shocked by events that are the consequence of the enaction of her own repressed and half-formed desires’. He gives the fictional example of Hitchcock’s film, *Rope*, in which

the homosexual couple strangles their best friend to win recognition from professor Caddell, their teacher who preaches the right of Supermen to dispose of the useless and weak; when Caddell is confronted with the verbatim realisation of his doctrine — when, in other words, he gets back from the other his own message in its inverted, true form, i.e., when the true dimension of his own ‘letter’ (teaching) reaches its proper addressee,

⁶³ Wollaston, *The Design of Part of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 105-6.

namely himself — he is shaken and [...] unprepared to recognise in them his own truth.⁶⁴

The mistake that is so easy to make in this mode of ‘the letter always arrives at its destination’ is to assume that ‘repression [can exist] previous to the return of the repressed’.⁶⁵ By this analogy, Žižek seems to suggest that Caddell had nothing more than a half-formed wish to see his desire enacted. It is this notion of the unformed nature of the repressed that has a particular value in identifying the theodictic dimension of Sterne’s fiction: it draws attention to the repressed consequences of unarticulated possibility — for example, the consequence of living in an ultimately inexplicable and amoral order — or the unacknowledged anticipation of the rewards and punishments of even entertaining half-acknowledged desires. The link to the fetishes of continence and design identified in Chapter 1 here become even more explicit. It can also be said that *Tristram Shandy* in particular is peppered with attempts to effect returns of repressed awareness in the reader but, in theodictic terms, the Phutatorius episode is especially pertinent.

One of the most theodictic remarks in *Tristram Shandy* comes right in the middle of the Visitation Dinner sequence and close to the heart of the Phutatorius episode:

When great or unexpected events fall out upon the stage of this sublunary world — the mind of man, which is an inquisitive kind of substance, naturally takes a flight, behind the scenes, to see what is the cause and first spring of them.⁶⁶

In the light of the way in which events fall out after this statement, in Žižek’s terms this is an almost explicit statement of the process whereby an addressee of an experience seeks out the opportunity of putting her own address on the envelope. This becomes clearer when it is noted that this moment marks a transition in the narrative.

⁶⁴ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 384.

Immediately before it is the description of Phutatorius's failed attempt to show stoic detachment as the pain in his groin increases and imagination makes the injury seem worse and more bizarre. This is followed by the removal of the hot chestnut and the discarding of it on the ground followed by Yorick rising to pick it up. As a result of this action, Phutatorius immediately surmises that Yorick was responsible for deliberately placing the chestnut — he sees the incident as a letter addressed to him. What follows is dominated by an account of how the event was interpreted by others and the significance of Yorick's name in the process of making such a determination. Norton's account of the Phutatorius episode rightly emphasises its implications as an exploration of neo-Stoicism. However, this necessarily leaves unattended the fact that the incident is not only about an attempt to manipulate subjectivity, it is also about the way in which events cohere with subjectivity — or how the letter arrives at its destination.

Tristram reports that a number of the clergy, either present at the Phutatorius incident or relying on reports of it, start to share the assumption that Yorick had deliberately thrown the chestnut into the open flap of Phutatorius's breeches as a 'prank' with 'a mystical meaning', namely as an apposite gesture against Phutatorius's book on the keeping of concubines:

and that his chucking the chestnut hot into *Phutatorius's* *** — *****
[cod-piece?] was a sarcastical fling at his book — the doctrines of which,
they said, had inflamed many an honest man in the same place.⁶⁷

At one level, the entire incident can be read as a joke designed for the benefit of the knowing reader capable of spotting a possible allusion to the Urquhart-Motteaux translation of Rabelais: the incident seems to make an oblique reference to a footnote to

⁶⁷ Ibid., I, p. 384.

the satire in Chapter 7 of Book II ('Pantagruel') on the obscurity, irrelevance, and self-serving nature of the ecclesiastical books in the Paris University library of St. Victor.⁶⁸ The allusion, from which the title of Phutatorius's book has been derived, positions the whole Visitation Dinner and the debate about changing a name given in baptism into the context of a Rabelaisian satire on the irrelevance of certain aspects of ecclesiastical life, with a clear hint at its propensity to corruption — the footnote in question refers to the pre-Reformation Catholic practice of 'couillage' ('wench-tribute') a term used to cover a number of practices including an ecclesiastical tax on the profits of prostitution.⁶⁹ Within this context, the theodictic import seems to be, at best, distinctly secondary were it not for the fact that the text pays lavish attention to the process whereby signifiers attach themselves to texts and events.

At its most fundamental level, this episode is a good candidate for use as a textbook example of the second mode of the letter always arriving at its destination — 'the inverted return of the repressed'. *Tristram Shandy* does not specify the position advanced by Phutatorius's book. Assuming that it is constructed as an allusion to the reference in 'Pantagruel', it does not say, for instance, whether the book is an argument for the restoration of couillage. All the text does is to suggest that Phutatorius's book is controversial and has a reputation for stimulating erotic desire.

However, the implication is that Phutatorius has strayed into a taboo area and that there is a quality of poetic justice about the burn that he receives on the penis. As a central part of the account of the attempts to explain the cause of the event, a

⁶⁸ Francis Rabelais, *The Works of Francis Rabelais*, trans. by Sir Thomas Urquhart and [Pierre] Motteaux, 2 vols (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849), 1, pp. 324-25. It is also possible that the Phutatorius episode should be read in conjunction with Sterne's 'Sermon 18' entitled, 'The Levite and his Concubine' which is an apologia for suspending judgement when confronted with a cleric who keeps a concubine (*Sermons*, pp. 167-76).

⁶⁹ Anne M. Haselkorn, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy* (Troy NY: Whitston, 1983), p. 9.

connection is made with Yorick's name and 'the man of jest' described in Hamlet's conversation with Horatio at Ophelia's graveside in *Hamlet*, Act v.1.⁷⁰ The imputation of the chestnut burning to Parson Yorick's deliberate act is thoroughly in accord with the process of (mis)recognition as a result of interpellation: Yorick's name makes him a suspect. Against this, it might be said that it can be explained in more conventional, Lockean terms of the association of ideas, but that does not account for the uncanny resemblance of the accident experienced by Phutatorius as an example of the return of the repressed — the connection between Phutatorius's injury and his book is not as arbitrary as the kind of connection identified by Locke as a danger of the association of ideas, for example the 'unfortunate' connection in Mrs. Shandy's mind between the winding of a clock and a monthly ration of sex.⁷¹ The incident as a whole, and in varying degrees, can be read as a process whereby the interpretation of events by all concerned bears an uncanny resemblance to a manifestation of their own half-formed wishes — and it is this characteristic of wish-fulfilment that subtly distinguishes the return of the repressed from the Lockean concept of the association of ideas and suggests that it is, rather, a symptom of theodictic concerns.

At the heart of Locke's account of the association of ideas is the connection made between '*Ideas*, not ally'd by Nature' to a variety of causes created by the mind 'either voluntarily or by Chance' including, rather obliquely, 'Inclinations [and] Interests'.⁷² *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* does not emphatically exclude what might now be called 'wish-fulfilment', but it does place the origin of the mechanism in something that is not identical with what might now be called 'the repressed'. What is more, it does not easily encompass the conclusion of the rhetorical thrust of the Phutatorius episode in

⁷⁰ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Hamlyn, 1958), p. 976.

⁷¹ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I, pp. 366-72; *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 7.

⁷² *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I, pp. 366-67.

which the other characters playfully suggest, in response to Phutatorius's request for medical advice, the best treatment of the burn on his penis:

I would advise you, *Phutatorius*, [said *Eugenius*] send to the next printer, and trust your cure to such a simple thing as a soft sheet of paper just come off the press [...] — The damp paper, quoth *Yorick* (who sat next to his friend *Eugenius*) though I know it has a refreshing coolness in it — [and] the oil and lamp black with which the paper is so strongly impregnated, does the business. [...] It falls out very luckily, replied *Phutatorius*, that the second edition of my treatise *de Concubinis retinendis*, is at this instant at the press — You may take any leaf of it, said *Eugenius* — No matter which — provided, quoth *Yorick* there is no bawdry in it.⁷³

The main import of this part of the episode seems to be a game shaped by a long-standing theme in *Tristram Shandy*: the way in which readers impute non-textual substance to texts, mistaking them for the author or for the things they describe. The connection between the imputed effect of Phutatorius's book and the poetic justice of the injury inflicted by the hot chestnut is better accounted for as a representation of the return of the repressed and it is this fact that opens up the main shortcoming of the association of ideas as an explanatory tool. It may acknowledge the arbitrariness of certain connections of ideas such as the connection between fresh print and the treatment of burns, but it does not take into account the ways in which arbitrary signifiers can be partially determined not by any property inherent in themselves — after all, if it were otherwise, they would not be arbitrary — but by gaps in the symbolic network and the capacity for the repressed to exact returns. It could be said that theodicy might be succinctly described as a problem created by gaps in the symbolic order.

Conclusions

Theodicy could be defined as a discourse that attempts to explain the difficulties created by a breakdown in conventions of signification. At its heart are preoccupations with the

⁷³ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 386-87.

possibility of omniscience, the risk of cosmic retribution for actions that come from an overflow of desire, the capacity to take upon oneself an identity that is transcendently guaranteed, and the capacity to interpret events as expressions of divinely exacted justice in accord with repressed desires. In this amalgam, earthquakes can be interpreted as signs of divine displeasure, and the existence of an apparently unmanageable reservoir of libidinal energy (which is only partially contained by a displaced obsession with its surplus) can be explained as a symptom of Original Sin. The Žižek-Lacanian concept of the big Other, ultimately defined as a symbolic structure rooted in language, ‘alien to and unassimilable by the subject, but into which the subject must be inserted or inscribed if it is to be able to speak and exist as a human being’, provides a fertile critical approach for understanding theodicy.⁷⁴ In this account, the idea that earthquakes can shift their ‘meaning’ and become signs of an unjustifiable anomaly in what appears to be a providentially designed mechanism, or that disorderly libidinal energy can be read as a symptom of coarse nerves or an unrefined capacity for sympathy can be much more clearly accounted for.

At one level, theodicy seems almost tailor-made for such an account: the very concept of *big Other* is shaped by the attempt to account for the tendency of subjectivities to postulate a transcendent, divine personality as the ground of the symbolic network in which they interact with objects. What is more, the very fact that such things as seismic events and repressed erotic desire can be symbolically reinscribed in this manner is good evidence of their arbitrariness as signifiers. Concepts such as the *subject supposed to know*, *surplus enjoyment*, and *the letter always arrives at its destination* not only account for certain phenomena within theodictic discourse and its co-symptoms, they are also extremely fertile when applied to Sterne’s fiction — and the fact that there is a kinship between

⁷⁴ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 286.

them is not wholly arbitrary. When the contemplation of a tortured victim of the Inquisition, or a languishing political prisoner in the Bastille, or accounts of genital mutilation can be embedded in a web of ironic cross-implications — by which comic and pathetic effects can be simultaneously achieved — it is a good reason for reading key themes in Sterne's fiction as fetishised co-symptoms of concerns that form the basis of theodicy debate. Furthermore, their fundamental relationship with contemporaneous theodictic fetishes of order and continence is all but explicit.

Much more needs to be said about the implications of the Newtonian, Lockean, Augustinian and sentimentalist contexts of Sterne's fiction, but it will owe its trajectory to the insights gained by applying the Žižek-Lacanian concepts of 'surplus enjoyment', 'the letters always arrives at its destination', and 'the subject supposed to know'. Elements of their implications even surface in a more synchronic, narratological reading of Sterne's fiction.

Chapter 3: Theodicy and narrative form

If the narrative form of Sterne's fiction fails to have any significant theodictic dimension then the relevance of theodicy to its elucidation will be limited at best. After all, few canonical fictions are as explicitly preoccupied with narrative form — even *A Sentimental Journey* is far from being narratologically naïve. It is a truism for many critical approaches that form and content can never be considered as wholly discrete.¹ In Žižek's terms, this is more than usually unavoidable: he insists that a proper psychoanalytic approach to the interpretation of dreams does not focus on its latent kernel of meaning but on its form (the *dream-work*).² Even if one does not make use of the whole range of Žižek-Lacanian theoretical paraphernalia, it is not unreasonable to assume that the theodictic dimension of Sterne's fiction does not simply subsist in what the texts tell but also in the way they tell them.

Sterne's fiction is manifestly about the literary representation of causality and of the experience of being caught in the midst of things to such an extent that it is hard to grasp the wider significance of what is happening.³ *Tristram Shandy* in particular is a comic representation of literary incompetence that expresses itself by its inability to find a coherent shape in the events of a human life. Its *double entendres* are a game designed to demonstrate the ways in which readers misappropriate texts in order to nourish fantasy.

¹ Although not concerned with fiction, an important example of this long-standing humanist preoccupation is found in Goring's argument that some of the early critics of Sterne's sermons objected to the immoral implications of his tendency to personify and apostrophise moral abstractions with the implication that this has a pagan, sub-Christian ring to it. The idea that form and content have ideological implications for each other is, of course, not a modern invention (Paul Goring, 'Thomas Weales's *The Christian Orator Delineated* (1778) and the Early Reception of Sterne's Sermons', in *TShan*, 13 (2002), 88–97 (p. 93)).

² *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 14; p. 16.

³ Making a narratological point, Keymer persuasively argues that the publishing history of *Tristram Shandy* particularly lends itself to the representation of indecipherable causality. He argues that Sterne's use of serialisation is a particularly apt vehicle for a depiction of the author as one who is trapped in chaos (*Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*, p. 87).

In other words, in purely narratological terms, it inevitably interrogates the authenticity of the fictional representation of subjectivity.

The experience of paralytically confusing immanence, the fruitless pursuit of a pattern embedded in human experience, the search for a principle of causality, the misappropriation of events in order to support fantasy, and the inability to grasp an underlying principle of authenticity, are all major aspects of *Tristram Shandy*, inalienably part of its narrative form, and each has profound conceptual affinities to the theodicy debate.⁴ Despite this, there is no significant exposition of this in the critical literature.⁵ What is more, these elements are also present to a significant, if lesser extent in *A Sentimental Journey*. Sterne's fiction is ripe for the application of theoretical tools concerned with the relationship between pattern-finding explanations of human life and the practice of storytelling. What emerges from all of this is the possibility that Sterne's fiction uniquely defamiliarises and exposes the procedures whereby literary fiction constructs pattern in the representation of human experience. These same procedures also have a visible kinship to those used by theodicy which is tied to the question, 'Is there a pattern that explains the relationship between human sinfulness and human suffering which thereby offers some justification for the pain?'

⁴ In a classic and extremely coherent reading of *Tristram Shandy*, Bradbury offers a very interesting narratological explanation for the perpetual indeterminacy of Sterne's fiction — although it does not develop the theodictic implications. He argues that *Tristram Shandy* substitutes narrative procedures with intellectual procedures and that this is the basis of its doubly ironic character and the fact that it is impossible to define with any certainty Sterne's own view of any matter and that it is therefore a 'comedy of ciphers' (Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Comic Novel in Sterne and Fielding', in *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, ed. by Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond ([n.p.]: Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. 124–131 (p. 130)).

⁵ In one of the very few glancing references to Sterne in *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man*, Freiburg contends that '*Tristram Shandy* [...], although a philosophical novel [...] denounces principles of holism [and in so doing it] symbolises a world fallen apart' ('Introduction', p. 27).

Considerable light can be shed on all of these issues both by applying theoretical tools with theodictic import which have not so far been applied to Sterne's fictions and by using established theoretical approaches whose theodictic implications have not yet been elucidated. Galen Strawson and Gary Saul Morson's approaches to narrativity (largely developed with applications in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and the exact sciences in mind) draw attention to the procedural aspects of narrative's representation of causality and pattern finding. Although he is not alone in his use of the concept (he is following a line which is cognate to one adopted by Virginia Woolf) Wolfgang Iser's notice of the representation of being-in-the-midst in Sterne's fiction has theodictic implications that deserve to be developed. In other words, there is some highly significant evidence that the narrative form of Sterne's fiction cannot be properly accounted for without some reference to the theodicy debate — a fact reinforced by the way that *Tristram Shandy* appropriates its sources.

However, it needs to be acknowledged from the outset that these theoretical approaches are not only distinct from Žižek's but are, at the axiomatic level, incompatible with it: neither Strawson, nor Morson, nor Iser, nor Woolf approach either Sterne's fiction or the phenomenon of narrativity from a psychoanalytic perspective. Despite this, Strawson and Morson's approaches open up aspects of narrative technique that are also explicable in terms of the Žižek-Lacanian concept of the Master-Signifier: the narratives of each fiction are complicated by the inevitable failure of Tristram and Yorick to fulfil their symbolic mandates as autobiographer and pious clergyman respectively.⁶ What is more, in narratological terms, this reveals that Sterne's fiction is not merely a representation of a pathological, subjective mindset, it is also about the failure of a particular kind of discourse as well — a discourse that, like

⁶ For a definition of the concept of 'Master-Signifier' see below, pp. 77-79.

theism, raises the expectation of global explanations. I will argue, therefore, that the theoretical approaches of Strawson, Morson, Iser, and Woolf yield results that can be rendered compatible with a fetishistic reading of Sterne's fiction and help identify the theodictic, disavowed lie that shapes the narrative style of both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*.

Strawson's Episodic type and the Master-Signifier

It is possible to overlook the fact that, whilst Sterne's fictions might be the product of highly competent authoring, Tristram is a profoundly incompetent narrator. It is possible to attribute subtlety to the narrator whilst confusing it with the efforts of the author.⁷ Tristram is inevitably incapable of achieving what he sets out to achieve: he is unable either to render his life into coherent narrative or to perform a large number of the textual promises he makes. He is constructed to be seemingly unaware that his literary activities are structured more by absurd re-enactments of hackneyed metaphors than by any coherent grasp of causality: for an explanation of such things as Toby's character or of the narrative in general, we must turn to the phrases 'he wouldn't hurt a fly', or 'a cock and bull story'.⁸ Tristram's incompetence in defining causal chains seems to render him suspicious of characters with greater narrative gifts — most particularly

⁷ It seems to me that this is a mistake made by Blackwell when she argues, from a feminist perspective, that *Tristram Shandy* is an implicit critique in narrative form of masculine obstetric haste in opposition to feminine, experiential midwifery. For Blackwell, *Tristram Shandy*'s narrative form is a demonstration of a conflict between progress and science on the one hand and received wisdom and common sense on the other. However, this can only be true if one assumes a kind of intuitive competence on Tristram's part (Bonnie Blackwell, 'Tristram Shandy and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother', in *ELH* 68 (2001), 81–133 (p. 83 and p. 116)).

⁸ Although he does not apply it to these aspects of the text nor with a view to identifying fetishistic elements in it, Lamb coherently argues that Sterne learnt from the Job controversy the key implication of the form of allegory: that, in allegories, figures stand for that which they are not ('The Job Controversy', p. 11). There is a kind of bathetic reversal involved in narrativising these clichés underneath which lie issues of compassion and purposiveness in narrative. In other words, it can be argued that they have a fetishistic quality.

Trim who is able to reduce his audience to tears ‘at the drop of a hat’ (although it is not clear that this idiom was current in Sterne’s milieu).⁹

Trim’s combination of sententious utterance and gesture in response to the news of Bobby’s death does not give rise to a meditation on the transitoriness of human life, it is represented as a rhetorical tool or weapon designed to achieve a form of emotional control over an audience:

Ye who govern this mighty world and its mighty concerns with the *engines* of eloquence, — who heat it, and cool it, and melt it, and mollify it, — and then harden it again to *your purpose* —

Ye who wind and turn the passions with this great windlass, — and, having done it, lead the owners of them, whither ye think it meet —

Ye, lastly, who drive — and why not, Ye also who are driven, like turkeys to market, with a stick and a red clout — meditate — meditate, I beseech you, upon *Trim’s* hat.¹⁰

A graver and more conventionally pious commentator than Tristram (who appears to share Yorick’s distaste for gravity) would have allowed the reader to receive the news of Bobby’s death as an occasion for repentance and amendment of life.¹¹ Tristram, however, insists on discovering a purpose in Trim’s narrative form other than the more conventional and pious awareness of the fact of human mortality as a divinely appointed warning to the wicked who yet live — a meaning that gives structure to life in the face of death is not found in the operation of natural laws but is produced by their rhetorical representation. At the very least, this suggests an ironic awareness of something illuminated by the Lacanian concept of surplus enjoyment. In other words, it is aware

⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 432. The earliest reference that the *OED* gives for ‘at the drop of a hat’ is from a quotation dated 1854. It also identifies the colloquialism as originating in the U.S.A..

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 433.

¹¹ David Mazella makes a very subtle and very important point when he argues that *Tristram Shandy* should be understood as symptomatic of a shift in literature as a category from mere didacticism to a discrete aesthetic category (David Mazella, ‘“Be Wary, Sir, When You Imitate Him”: The Perils of Didacticism in *Tristram Shandy*’, in *SitN*, 31 (1999), 152–77 (p. 155)). However, the representation of Trim’s oratorical performance after the death of Bobby still needs to be understood in terms of its disavowed lie which is indicated by the comic representation of something that, in certain later developments of the novel as well as those contemporaneous with Sterne, would be treated as a matter of ultimate seriousness.

that sentimental representations of grief while apparently claiming to be *It* in Žižek's sense are emphatically not *It*.¹²

It could be that by doing this *Tristram Shandy* is nudging to the foreground of the reader's consciousness the possibility that, by the very act of telling a story, a narrator is making a metaphysical statement. In his introduction to *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man*, Freiburg argues that, 'Literature as theodicy in its formal design indicates to a certain degree the belief in the meaningfulness of the world as real and presented'. He goes on to say, 'The more novels embrace chaotic principles the more they deviate from the purpose of "vindicating the ways of God to men" ', and he gives *Tristram Shandy* as a specific example of this kind of novel.¹³ Whilst this overlooks some of the ambiguities of the theodictic implications in Sterne's fiction, its fundamental premise has considerable validity: formally designed narratives as representations of experience carry within them the assumption of a formally designed purpose to human life. It is possible that stories which imply that causal connections between events can be sufficiently accounted for, from which a specific telos can be inferred, or from whose denouement an inevitability can be traced, however common they may be or whatever apparent ideological cause they may seek to serve, may be gilding the phenomena they represent with a transcendental and metaphysically definable assumption. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that any such assumption is likely to have a considerable bearing on theodictic discourse. The reason for this is simple: the theodicy debate arises from the inability of subjects to see a morally justifiable and transcendent telos or pattern in events that cause suffering. By applying two apparently contradictory narratological

¹² In addition to the explanation of surplus enjoyment offered in Chapter 2 above, pp. 47-49, it might help to say that this is analogous to the point already quoted that Žižek makes about Coke — the drink that does not quench thirst or nourish but is nevertheless advertised as 'the Real Thing' (Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 19).

¹³ Freiburg, p. 27.

approaches developed by Strawson and Morson, the theodictic implication of the form of *Tristram Shandy* in particular becomes much more explicit.

For Strawson, the metaphysical nature of the assumption underlying narrative practice becomes most clearly visible in the attempt of the subject to render autobiography into the form of a narrative of connected events. He even goes so far as to argue that most of those who encourage people to see their lives as narratives ‘connectedly have religious commitments’.¹⁴ For Strawson, the imposition of narrative procedures on the account of real life happenings inevitably involves a reconstruction of facts — a process that he calls *revision* — that is driven by the unannounced belief that pattern must exist in the succession of events.¹⁵ He illuminates this by contrasting the *Diachronic* type who sees life as a narrative with the *Episodic* type for whom pattern in life events is either suspect or not self-evident. He argues that the Diachronic type bases the practice of autobiography on the contestable assumption that the subject is fundamentally self-identical with the person she was in the distant past and will be in the distant future.¹⁶ In ‘A Fallacy of Our Age’, his list of classic Episodic types glancingly includes Sterne.¹⁷ There is little question that *Tristram Shandy* conforms to a number of the criteria Strawson establishes to identify the Episodic outlook — although *A Sentimental Journey* may not fare quite so well in that test. For a Strawsonian, this fact would suggest that *Tristram Shandy*, by virtue of its narrative form, and insofar as it

¹⁴ Galen Strawson, ‘A Fallacy of Our Age: Not Every Life is a Narrative’, in *TLS*, 15 October 2004, pp. 13-15 (p. 14). Strawson gives a more strictly academic account of his theory in ‘Against Narrativity’ (*Ratio*, 17 (2004), 428-52). However, there are a number of references in each article that do not appear in the other which are germane to the application of his theory in this argument. This is why it is necessary to reference both articles.

¹⁵ ‘A Fallacy of Our Age’, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13. It is interesting to note, however, that Sterne’s name disappears from his list of Episodics in the peer-reviewed version of the *TLS* article (‘Against Narrativity’, p. 432).

refuses to reconstruct a coherent narrative account of Tristram's life, is a manifestation of religious scepticism.

It is certainly a crude oversimplification to insist that Strawson conceives of the Diachronic approach to narrative as inalienably religious, but it is not an overstatement to argue that religious assumptions attach themselves more easily to what might be called the homuncular concept of human identity that underlies his concept of the Diachronic type, i.e. the assumption of an underlying constant that provides a basis for an enduring unity of the subject. It is this principle of unity (added to the specific undertones for the concept of the homunculus that is used to open *Tristram Shandy*) that provides a key component to the overall assertion that the narrative form of Sterne's fiction is uniquely positioned to attach to itself the kind of metaphysical assumptions that link it to the theodicy debate. It also ironises that invocation of the homunculus as a trope more technically suited to the Diachronic approach. Tristram is, in Strawsonian terms, an Episodic because he's something of a cypher whose connection with the Shandean hypotheses is ambiguous or ironic — a self-consistent continuity of identity is therefore not clearly evident in the text. What is more, the central characteristic of Tristram's identity (encapsulated in his conception) as 'the child of interruption' makes him a prime candidate for definition as an Episodic.¹⁸ He is perpetually thwarted in his attempt to account for a self-consistent identity underlying his history.

The reference to the homunculus and to the idea of an enduring, self-consistent identity that guarantees the coherence of the subject points to a key concept in Žižek that has significant theodictic implications and is extremely fruitful when applied to an analysis of Sterne's fiction: the concept of the *Master-Signifier*. Žižek's use of this concept is multifaceted and can sometimes be elusive and it also has to be read in the light of the

¹⁸ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 2; I, p. 354.

Žižek-Lacanian concept of the discourses of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, and the Analyst — each of which is used by Žižek to explain the dynamics of how subjectivities relate to each other.¹⁹ His definition of the Master-Signifier achieves a high level of clarity in *The Fragile Absolute*:

in the discourse of the Master [i.e. the discourse rooted in the impulse to control], the subject's identity is guaranteed by [...] the Master-Signifier (his symbolic title-mandate), fidelity to which defines the subject's ethical dignity. Identification with the Master-Signifier leads to the tragic mode of existence: the subject endeavours to sustain his fidelity to the Master-Signifier — say, to the mission which gives meaning and consistency to his life — to the end, and his attempt ultimately fails because of the remainder that resists the Master-Signifier. In contrast, there is the slippery-shifting subject who lacks any stable support in the Master-Signifier, and whose consistency is sustained by the relationship to the pure remainder/trash/excess, to some 'undignified', inherently comic, little bit of the Real; such an identification with the leftover, of course, introduces the mocking-comic mode of existence, the parodic process of the constant subversion of all firm symbolic identifications.²⁰

Despite the fact that that this definition seems designed for something akin to the Shakespearean version of the *King Lear* story, this paragraph could nevertheless stand as an apt summary of Tristram's entire attempt to narrativise his life. His 'mission' to give an account of his life and opinions — which is literally his 'title-mandate' — 'ultimately fails because of the remainder that [in Tristram's case] resists the Master-Signifier' of the self-memorialist. The 'slippery-shifting subject who lacks any stable support' — a perfectly apt description of Tristram as a persona and as a narrator — that lies at the heart of this failed attempt could be easily recast in the terms of the Strawsonian

¹⁹ The most succinct definition that Žižek gives of the four discourses is in *Tarrying with the Negative*. He describes the relative positions of four of the main characters in the Mozart/Da Ponte opera, *Don Giovanni*. He summarises them as follows (albeit using a slightly different terminology): the Master discourse, self-confident, trying to take control in the emergency, but which fails because it is ultimately inauthentic; the University discourse, lacking authenticity but consistent in its compulsive pursuit of knowledge in order to 'integrate, domesticate, and appropriate the excess that resists and rejects it'; the Hysteric discourse which is self-contradictory but nevertheless 'authentic in its very confusion'; and the discourse of the Analyst which is self-consistent and authentic (*Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 274, n. 24.) Also, 'Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses', in *Lacan Dot Com* <<http://www.lacan.com>> [accessed 12 February 2010].

²⁰ *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 39.

Episodic type. The ‘consistency’ of the persona of Tristram seems to be ‘sustained by the relationship to the pure remainder/trash/excess, to some “undignified”, inherently comic, little bit of the Real’ — the endless digressions on what may be inconsequential details, the libidinal and transgressive irrelevancies, the disproportions in which incidents like his brother Bobby’s death get marginalised in the account of the obsessions of the household whilst Tristram moralises on the fall of Trim’s hat.²¹ The Master-Signifier/title-mandate of the autobiographer capable of rendering his life in a coherent and dignified form cannot exclude the remaindered possibility that it is tangled up in a cock-and-bull story — the hackneyed metaphors seem to have more effectiveness as signifiers than the narrator himself.

This draws attention to the fact that what is at stake here is not the identity of a real person (after all, Tristram is a construct) but the whole undertaking of narrativity as it is represented in *Tristram Shandy*. In theodictic and narratological terms, it can be argued that the persona of Tristram is a demonstration of the failure of the Master-Signifiers that define empirical narrative to account either for experience itself or for transcendental meanings that valorise the experience of suffering. Against this it could be objected that Tristram is, after all, an incompetent narrator. However, *Tristram Shandy* is a persuasive example of a text that suggests that all fictions and all biographies that purport to let the reader into ‘the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you’ are trading on an unrealisable fantasy.

The same applies in slightly different terms to *A Sentimental Journey*: it appears in the transgressive undertones that constitute the ambiguities of the subject labouring

²¹ This line is both suggested and reinforced by Gourdon’s plausible hypothesis that *Tristram Shandy* is symptomatic of an inability to conceptualise human life and assess its relative importance — its scale — in the wake of the discovery of the telescope and microscope (Gisèle Gourdon, ‘Confinements and Flights of the Characters in *Tristram Shandy*’, in *TShan*, 10 (1998), 92–106 (p. 96)).

under the Master-Signifier ('symbolic title-mandate') of the clergyman. It is under this Master-Signifier, with its demands of religious single-mindedness and chastity, that preoccupations with philosophical materialism tinged with an aura of hesitancy emerge and which are set in a series of eroticised encounters teasingly draped with partial sublimations. This closely resembles a textbook demonstration of the failure of the discourse of the Master (in this case empirical autobiography and spiritual autobiography/travelogue) to provide an adequate account of identity and its inability to integrate those awarenesses and impulses which its Master-Signifier disavows (i.e. the possibility of chaos and solipsism and the presence of transgressive libidinal impulses). However, the full significance of this dimension to narrativity emerges from Morson's concept of *narrativeness* which is, at first sight, antipodal to Strawson's concept of the tensions between the Episodic and Diachronic types.

Morson's concept of narrativity

For Morson, true narrative inalienably has a quality of suspense which depends upon a multiplicity of probable outcomes.²² His theory, with a tendency that, like Strawson's, seems peculiarly appropriate to the analysis of Sterne's fiction, defines *narrativeness* as something that inevitably implies 'messiness' and is defined in opposition to an epistemological assumption that he directly attributes to Leibnizian rationalism which he in turn characterises as an *antinarrative* form of knowing.²³ He defines antinarrativeness as an epistemological approach that seeks to reduce the explanation of phenomena to axioms rather than narratives — an approach whose whole purpose is to reduce narrativeness to an absolute minimum.²⁴ In purely empirical terms, a Morsonian

²² Gary Saul Morson, 'Narrativeness', *NLH*, 34 (2003), 59–73 (p. 61).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–68.

would describe the laws of thermodynamics as *antinarrative* and the account of the biological evolution of a particular species of duck as *narrative*.

More specifically, a Morsonian could also argue that Walter's inappropriately antinarrative *Tristrapædia* is, in its failure to be of any practical use, a demonstration of the futility of pattern-finding (and implicitly religious) accounts of human life: it fails not only because of the excessive caution behind its formation, but also because, by choosing to catalogue the implicitly antinarrative phenomena of 'thoughts, counsels, and notions', it is rendered incapable of encompassing the messiness that is inevitably involved in realities that can only be comprehended narratively.²⁵ From this perspective, *Tristram Shandy* could be taken as a vivid demonstration of the incalculable range of possible antecedents and outcomes implicit in every moment of human experience, outcomes that defy and overtake antinarrative attempts to theorise, and show everyday life as a sphere in which Leibnizian, theistic reductionism is shown to be a hopelessly inadequate and arbitrary piece of rationalisation.

However, Morson's approach (like Strawson's) can be understood in terms of Žižek's concept of the Master-Signifier — the symbolic mandate that antinarratively seeks to impose a coherence on events that can only be known narratively and whose messiness is an index of the 'pure remainder/trash/excess, [the] "undignified", [...] the leftover' that resists being subjected to the imperialist claims of the Master-Signifier. It is in this that a kind of harmony can be achieved between the Strawsonian and Morsonian concepts of narrative as they might be applied to Sterne's fiction.

Despite their apparently opposite tendencies, with Strawson identifying narrativeness as a hide for covert theism and Morson finding theism lurking in antinarrativeness, these perspectives have at least one point at which they achieve a

²⁵ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 445.

commensurability that's particularly relevant to identifying theodictic tendencies in Sterne's fiction: both implicitly found their understanding of narrative on the basis of its relationship to an assumed telos. Strawson implicitly objects to the Diachronic type who insists that all life stories can be retrospectively reconstructed on the assumption that the connected narrative this produces is a reliable manifestation of a self-identical, stable subject as an organising principle. Morson is similarly defending certain spheres of enquiry such as Social Science and Evolutionary Biology from ideological appropriation by those who assume the existence of a predetermined end to biological and social form — in Žižek's terms, an apparently textbook example of one Master discourse trying to resist the encroachments of another Master discourse.²⁶

For both Strawsonian and Morsonian theories, the teleological assumption that is commonly imported into narrative practice — whether in autobiography, or the accounts of the biological evolution of a species, or in fiction — is in every case at least partially conditioned by an implicitly religious assumption: the impetus towards pattern-finding where, in more narrowly empirical terms, there is no necessary pattern. In this sense, what they postulate is also compatible with Žižek's concept of the letter always arrives at its destination.

²⁶ Morson, p. 66. It would be easy to slip into the mistake of assuming that, because the Strawsonian and Morsonian theories are examples of formal academic discourse, they therefore correspond to the Lacanian concept of 'university discourse'. Žižek's approach suggests that to make this identification would be a mistake. At the outset of 'Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses', he points out that such identifications are the result of a misunderstanding ('Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses', in *Lacan Dot Com* <<http://www.lacan.com>>, para 1, [accessed 12 February 2010]). The Strawsonian and Morsonian approaches, in their insistence that certain kinds of experience elude systematic explanation, seem to specifically resist 'university discourse' in its proper sense, i.e. something that's evolved for use in the academy but inevitably fails in its attempt 'to integrate, domesticate, and appropriate [by knowledge] the excess that resists and rejects it'. The argument of this chapter is that Sterne's fiction does not represent an attempt to tame by the pursuit of knowledge the excess within experience but the inevitable failure of an attempt to assume a guaranteeing 'symbolic title-mandate' of autobiographer and memorialising critic alike — and 'symbolic title-mandates' in this sense are, for Žižek, a key aspect of the discourse of the Master not of the university.

Being-in-the-midst

Whilst the approaches of Strawson and Morson are each capable of producing results compatible with Žižek's concept of the inevitable failure of Master-Signifiers, neither of them is able to cover an aspect of the narrative technique of Sterne's fiction that is rather effectively described by what Iser, in his analysis of Sterne's fiction, calls *being in the midst*.²⁷ This does not represent some essential flaw in either Strawson or Morson's theories because neither of them was designed to deal with the specifics of Sterne's fiction. Being-in-the-midst might even be a useful shorthand for the Strawsonian scepticism about the existence of what he regards as the teleological impostor, namely a belief in the continuous self-identity of the subject. It certainly encapsulates the concept of messiness that Morson insists is an almost indispensable dimension of true narrative.

These conveniences aside, it is also a phrase that calls attention to a state in which beginnings and ends may not be easily apprehensible and, as has already been stated, when the subject protests against unmerited suffering, it is a plea to see, in both senses of the word, an end (termination and purpose) to suffering — and 'end' in this sense is best encapsulated by the term, *telos*.²⁸ It is also suggestive of Žižek's concept of the excremental remainder produced by a Master-Signifier which starts to occupy a position centre stage because of the unsustainability of the disavowal upon which the Master-Signifier is based. However, this is not the most significant kinship between Iser's approach to Sterne and the implications for the fictions of Žižek's concepts.

²⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: 'Tristram Shandy'*, trans. by David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 56.

²⁸ Sim raises a question with very similar consequences. He argues that *Tristram Shandy* embodies, even within its narrative form, the experience of apparent freewill within wider, deterministic and chaotic forces. He also offers a plausible explanation of the relationship of the narrative form of *Tristram Shandy* to Newtonian ideology when he argues that it implicitly rejects a Newtonian model of order and at best exemplifies concepts more analogous to the 'Butterfly Effect' ('All that Exists are "Islands of Determinism"', p. 100). This latter point serves to suggest a link with the fetishising of order in Sterne's milieu.

‘Being in the midst’ is a phrase that Iser uses to epitomise the representational effect of *Tristram Shandy*. He uses it to prove that *Tristram Shandy* exhibits both the arbitrariness of narration as a representation of experience and its expedience as a means to enable the subject to cope with the essential ‘ungraspability’ of life:

Tristram exposes his own fantasy himself, in order to show that what it has grasped is an imposed pattern, and also to show that being in the midst of life requires such patterns to give form to its ungraspability. But these forms must not — as narratives usually do — represent life or pass themselves off as constituents of life; instead they must be revealed as necessary pragmatic interventions. Only in this way can it be made clear beyond doubt that they are nothing but instruments, which explains both their plurality and their contradictions.²⁹

Not only does this resemble Žižek’s concept of the arbitrariness of signifiers that underlie the process of the letter always arriving at its destination, it has immense implications for the relationship between the narrative form of Sterne’s fiction and theodictic discourse.³⁰

Many atheists, following a line that is compatible with Žižek’s definition of a fetish, have commonly argued that religious believers, rather than accepting life as a sequence of purely expedient and arbitrary acts, are compelled to turn to metaphysical explanations of life in order to cope with its essential ‘ungraspability’.³¹ In other words, Iser’s characterisation of the act of narration, as it is ultimately parodied and rejected by *Tristram Shandy*, bears an uncanny resemblance to a secularist characterisation of the essential absurdity of theism. This reinforces the hypothesis that the act of narration may carry within it an unexamined metaphysical assumption and that the narrative form of Sterne’s fiction problematises that assumption. However, the great preponderance of theoretical material with unexamined theodictic implications tends to be devoted to the analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. Another piece of canonical criticism — this time focused on

²⁹ Iser, p. 59.

³⁰ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 14.

³¹ This is the clear implication of Strawson’s version of the Diachronic personality described in Chapter 3 above, pp. 77-78.

A Sentimental Journey — also contains undeveloped indications that point towards the representation of being in the midst and the theodicy debate, namely Woolf's analysis.

For Woolf, as for Iser, it is Sterne's success in conveying experience with a vivid immediacy in which the perspectives of a clear knowledge of beginnings and ends is usually denied that makes him particularly admirable.³² But Woolf goes a step further than Iser in this respect. Her analysis points towards the theodictic fetish of continence by arguing that this quality of being in the midst is inextricably bound to the mixture of hedonism and stoicism that she imputes to Sterne and which she commends for being at odds with his profession as a clergyman and conditioned by the experience of suffering:

It was a daring thing for a clergyman to perceive a relationship between religion and pleasure. Yet it may, perhaps, excuse him that in his own case the religion of happiness had a great deal of difficulty to overcome.³³

Not only does this tend to support the idea of Yorick's clerical identity as a Master-Signifier/title-mandate, such a view of *A Sentimental Journey* seems to place it in a direct relationship to theodictic discourse: for Woolf, Sterne is transgressively asserting a religious value to hedonism and this is also directly dependent upon a narrative technique that foregrounds the immediate at the expense of its relationship to wider, overarching metaphysical significances.³⁴

Understandably enough, Woolf's characterisation of pleasure is not identical to the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. It assumes that its greatest effect is in the experience

³² Virginia Woolf, 'The Sentimental Journey', in *The Common Reader, Second Series* <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c2/chapter7.html>> [accessed 23 November 2004], para 3.

³³ Ibid., para 18.

³⁴ Lamb makes a typically subtle and apposite point on the subject of pleasure in the narrative form of Sterne's fiction which has particular appeal for a Žižek-Lacanian reading of the texts (although this, of course, is not his theoretical perspective): he argues that *Tristram Shandy* is 'profoundly antinovelistic', that it is a celebration of the joyous moment of the individual rather than the sequence of events that leads inevitably to death (Jonathan Lamb, 'Sterne and Irregular Oratory', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 153–74 (p. 170)).

of the immediate and this may be a key factor in Woolf's preference for Sterne's narrative technique as opposed to Richardsonian 'writing to the moment' which is, for all its attempts to convey a sense of immediacy, nevertheless subject to an intense teleological pull.³⁵ Woolf's analysis suggests conclusions that are consistent with the possibility that Sterne's fiction is implicitly employing narrative as a solution to the metaphysical problem of inexplicable suffering: she characterises Sterne's narrative technique as something that represents the immediacy of experience and is yet 'based upon something fundamentally philosophic'.³⁶ What is more, Woolf's analysis implies that Sterne does this whilst also creating a formal vehicle for the representation of pleasure that is carefully protected from the consideration of beginnings and ends. This is not a marginal aspect of the narrative form of Sterne's fiction as Woolf understands it, and the fact that it has considerable implications for the understanding of Woolf's own narrative technique tends to suggest that its significance is not purely local.

At the very least, Woolf's analysis of the narrative form of Sterne's fiction draws attention to the possibility that it represents a profound interruption in the hermeneutic circle (i.e. the development of an interpretative model by shuttling between specifics and generalisations).³⁷ It is hard to deny that in *Tristram Shandy* the relationship between the particular and the general is radically destabilised. This is crucial because mainstream theodicies assume that experience itself can be subjected to something analogous to a

³⁵ Eagleton plausibly argues that, '*Tristram Shandy* can be seen as a monstrous parody of Richardson's "writing to the moment" ' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 79).

³⁶ Woolf, para 17.

³⁷ Lamb argues that, 'It is impossible for an eighteenth-century theodicy decisively to manipulate the difference between the being of the whole, which is because it is right, and the myriad of particulars and exceptions, which is assigned a place in the general scheme in spite of the omnipresence of right' (*The Rhetoric of Suffering*, p. 70).

hermeneutic procedure.³⁸ After all, the narrative consists of a series of digressions which often prove to be cul-de-sacs and from which an overarching, coherent dialogue between the general and the specific seems to be beyond extraction.

An approach that is inclined to reconstruct Sterne's fiction as the expression of literary and theological conservatism could with good reason argue that its concern is less with metaphysical issues than with a parody of vulgar errors in literary consumption and textual interpretation. Against this even Parker, who persuasively argues both that Sterne's fiction is an expression of a sceptical position and that scepticism can be anti-secularist as well as secularist, also asserts (following a line he picks up from Rorty) that literary discourse is epistemologically well suited to situations where there is a perception that wider systems of rationality are failing.³⁹ For the purposes of literary criticism, this possibility is most clearly manifest in the problem of intentionalism: to what extent can one use a reconstruction of the author's intentions as a guide to the meaning of a given text? The narrative form of Sterne's fiction is peculiarly alive to the errors of intentionalist fallacies and of the questions these raise for the relationship

³⁸ A clear example of this from the Anglican mainstream is to be found in Warburton's sermon preached in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake, 'Natural and Civil Events the Instruments of God's Moral Government'. After extrapolating general principles from scripture to show how Christians are to interpret calamity, he then goes on to demonstrate his points with simple casuistry by showing how these principles should be instantiated which then, in turn, elaborates the general principles. For example, to demonstrate the inadequacy of the deist position that denies the possibility that God is the 'moral Ruler' of the world but simply its 'physical Dispenser': 'Such men, amidst all these general warnings of awakening Nature, will find their condition to be most disconsolate and forlorn; their principles having bereft them of all these hopes which are for ever springing up in the breast of the religious man. [...] Thus the hapless unbeliever, while enraged Nature is sounding in his ears, has no whither to fly for refuge from his terrors: he sees himself in a fatherless and abandoned world, exposed to all the rage of deaf and unrelenting elements'. Having dismissed this position by instantiating it, he concludes, 'every consideration serves to establish the religious principle of my text, as here explained' (*Natural and Civil Events*, pp. 12-13).

³⁹ Parker, pp. 2-4.

between the interpretation of text and the representation of transcendent meaning in life events — both of which are undertakings that are also vital parts of theodictic discourse.⁴⁰

In the light of this, citing Sterne's correspondence in order to assert that his fiction is self-consciously aware of narratological manoeuvres that question the extent of the author's intentions may appear to have an ironic quality. However, what is at issue is the possibility that the fiction is a manifestation of a deliberate awareness of authorial control. In one of his most explicit and frequently quoted statements about the implications of his narrative form, Sterne himself wrote:

a true feeler always brings half the entertainment along with him. His own ideas are only call'd forth by what he reads, and the vibrations within, so entirely correspond with those excited, 'tis like reading himself and not the book.⁴¹

The probability that the account Sterne gives here of his narrative form (being wary of Tristram's testimony on the question) is directly rooted in *Tristram Shandy* itself is confirmed by the context of one of the key quotations from Burton.

Shortly after the passage from which one of the mottoes is derived for the title page of Volume v ('non ego, sed Democritus dixit' — 'not I, but Democritus said it'),

The Anatomy of Melancholy goes on to say:

If any be displeased, or take ought unto himself, let him not expostulate or cavil with him that said it [...] 'but let him be angry with himself, that so betrayed and opened his own faults in applying it to himself'.⁴²

If the quotation from Sterne's correspondence is a reliable account of his own technique, the narrative form of *Tristram Shandy* seems to be conditioned by assumptions

⁴⁰ Alvarez contends in a thoroughlygoingly humanist manner that *Tristram Shandy* is a demonstration of the fact that narrative form is capable of being the product solely of the individual will (A. Alvarez, 'Introduction', in *Laurence Sterne: A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, ed. by Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 7–19 (p. 7)).

⁴¹ *The Letters*, II, p. 646.

⁴² Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), pp. 72–73; *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 403.

that rationality is not self-evident and that meaning may be the random product of a meeting of two phenomena between whom there may be few, if any, shared hermeneutic assumptions: the text and the reader.⁴³

Like Iser's approach, such a reading is also significantly commensurable with Žižek's assertion of the arbitrariness of signifiers that underlies the concept of the letter always arriving at its destination.⁴⁴ In this version of Shandean reading practice the establishment of fixed meanings is a peculiarly difficult undertaking. The theodictic implications of this are manifold: when one reads such narratological assumptions theodictically it highlights the extent to which non-verbal reality, the physical sensation of suffering, is displaced into an almost entirely linguistic medium which is perforce ideologically determined and dependent on agreed meanings for any resolution. Such an implication is deeply resonant with the Lacanian account of the symbolic order ('the universe of the Word') in the subject's apprehension of reality: a register totally determined by language and that lacks the capacity to integrate experiences that fall outside that register (the 'Real') and with all the theodictic implications that entails.⁴⁵

This crucial dimension to theodictic discourse — the incommensurability of verbal and non-verbal manifestations of suffering and sympathy — is expressed in one of the central episodes of *Tristram Shandy*: Toby's failed verbal attempt to console Walter as the latter lies on his bed in prostrate grief in a pathetic parody of the biblical

⁴³ The narratological assertion that even the good reader 'brings half the entertainment along with him', and is ultimately responsible for the meanings she imports into the text, presciently demonstrates the artificiality and unreliability of what Foucault calls the 'author function' — i.e. a cultural phenomenon in which the ascription of authorship undergoes radical shifts in significance and implication (Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 101-20 (p. 108)).

⁴⁴ See discussion of this concept in Chapter 2 above, pp. 57-59.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 58.

character, Job, and the dialogue with Job's comforters whose failure to console became proverbial:⁴⁶

My good uncle *Toby* [...] full gladly would have ingrafted a sentence of consolation [into the "hem" with which he responded to the prostrate Walter]; but having no talents [...] that way, and fearing moreover that he might set out with something which might make a bad matter worse, he contented himself with resting his chin placidly upon the cross of his crutch.

Now whether the compression shortened my uncle *Toby*'s face into a more pleasurable oval, — or that the philanthropy of his heart, in seeing his brother beginning to emerge out of the sea of his afflictions, had braced up the muscles [...] is not hard to decide. — My father, in turning his eyes, was struck with such a gleam of sun-shine in his face, as melted down the sullenness of his grief in a moment. [...]

Did ever man, brother *Toby*, cried my father [...] receive so many lashes? — The most I ever saw given, quoth my uncle *Toby* [...] was to a grenadier, I think in Mackay's regiment.

— Had my uncle *Toby* shot a bullet thro' my father's heart, he could not have fallen down with his nose upon the quilt more suddenly.⁴⁷

Toby's attempt to console Walter fails precisely at the point where Walter's pain and Toby's reaction to it are verbalised.⁴⁸ In Žižek's terms, this is a prime example of a 'moment of radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended'.⁴⁹ Such a phrase could also be used to describe the experience that is at the heart of the theodicy debate.

From a Žižek-Lacanian perspective, its significance in terms of narrative and the representational capacity of language is crucial. Žižek goes on to define this 'moment of radical openness' in terms of the failure of the symbolic order (rooted in language) to incorporate all experiences — i.e. in Lacanian terms, the Real which often manifests itself in the form of 'the Thing'. When Walter collapses on his bed after hearing about

⁴⁶ Lamb is right to identify this incident as a reprise of the Job scenario (*Sterne's Fiction and the Double Principle*, p. 15).

⁴⁷ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 327-28.

⁴⁸ When Walter falls prostrate, not only is he being cast as a bathetic imitation of the theodictic figure of Job, he is also providing an illustration of the letter arriving at its destination — after all, Walter is experiencing a 'return of the repressed' as the curses that underlie his hypotheses all come to pass. See Chapter 2 above, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁹ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 9.

the crushing of Tristram's nose (the realisation of one of his greatest fears for his child)

he is also acting as another example of the moment

when the subject's presence is exposed outside the symbolic support, [...] it materializes [...] the void in the Other (the symbolic order), the void designated, in Lacan, by the German word *das Ding*, the Thing, the pure substance of enjoyment [*jouissance*] resisting symbolization.⁵⁰

When Walter collapses on his bed, he is reacting to the confusion of the symbolic order that defines his engagement with the world, the defeat of one of the last of his great hypotheses — the moment of Tristram's conception has been corrupted by interruption, his birth appears to not have gone according to plan, his nose has been flattened and all that remains to come is his misnaming as 'Tristram'. Walter's presence is 'exposed outside the symbolic support' which he has evolved for himself and he is confronted by 'the void in the Other'.

The incident is packed with barely sublimated, if ironic, theodictic import. But, in narratological terms, the incident of Walter's collapse and Toby's failed attempt to offer verbal consolation seems to suggest that the incommensurability between suffering and its verbalisation is demonstrably cognate with the manner in which it is implicitly constructed as a textual/verbal problem — and a key manifestation of that problem is, in Žižek's terms, the manifestation of 'the Thing'. As an object that is, by definition, something that cannot be properly encompassed by the symbolic order, it too has manifestly theodictic implications. Nor is it simply a matter of incompetent narration: the text nudges into visibility the inevitability of the failure of the symbolic order to encompass what Žižek and Lacan call the 'Real'. The narrative order of *Tristram Shandy*

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

is not merely determined by the persona of Tristram, it is also shaped by the Master-Signifier of the clergyman which lies behind the appropriation of Montaigne.⁵¹

The partially repressed, fetishistic awareness of libidinal subtexts is one aspect of the fetish of continence that cannot be wholly explained without some reference to the theodicy debate. After all, the anxieties are not simply related to the supposed erotogenic power of the text, they are motivated by an often inchoate sense of the *double entendres* as religiously transgressive, invitations of divine displeasure, signalled by the Master-Signifier of the clergyman author. This issue surfaced early in the critical reception of the fiction of which a representative sample can be found in the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* of April 1760:

it were greatly to be wished [that the author of *Tristram Shandy*] had been more sparing in the use of indecent expressions. Indecent! did I say? Nay, even downright gross and obscene expressions are frequently to be met with throughout the book [...]. But how far is it excusable in any author, especially one who wears the gown [i.e. is a clergyman], to gratify and promote a prevailing corrupted taste, either directly or indirectly, let himself and the world judge.⁵²

This censure is intensified by the association of the text with the occupation of the author. The *Universal Magazine*, in making this remark, signally fails a highly significant test for the critic embedded early in Volume I in Tristram's allusion to Montaigne — an allusion which effectively has the status of a shibboleth perfectly designed to distinguish

⁵¹ In the most direct terms, the title-mandate of the author as clergyman is a key feature of the appropriation of Burton and Erasmus and the use of the beginning of the Third Partition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton, alluding to the quotation from *Praise of Folly* that is used as the title quotation for Volume VI of *Tristram Shandy*, states, 'There will not be wanting, I presume, one or other that will much discommend some part of this Treatise of Love-Melancholy, and object (which *Erasmus* in his Preface to *Sir Thomas Moore* suspects of his) that it is too light for a Divine, too Comical a Subject to speak of Love-Symptomes, too phantastical, and fit alone for a wanton Poet, a feeling young love-sick gallant, an effeminate Courtier, or some such idle person' (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 406).

⁵² Quoted in Alan B. Howes, ed., *Sterne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 63.

covertly the knowing from the ignorant reader.⁵³ What is more, this allusion has a theodictic significance which seems to signal an explicit awareness of the fetishistic quality of consolatory fiction. The key datum in this argument is the use that *Tristram Shandy* makes of Montaigne's essay, 'Upon Some Verses of Virgil'.

When Tristram aspires to write a book that will 'be no less read than the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself', he also expresses the wistful awareness that, in such an eventuality, it is also likely to 'prove the very thing which Montaigne dreaded his essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour window'.⁵⁴ This allusion to Montaigne is doubly telling: it contains a disguised defence against charges of literary indecency whilst revealing which of his purportedly polite readers or learned literary critics actually use Montaigne in exactly the way he anticipates:

I am vex'd that my *Essays* only serve the *Ladies* for a common moveable, a Book to lye in the Parlour Window; this chapter will prefer me to the Closet; I love to traffic with them a little in private; publick conversation is without favour and without savour. In farewells, we above ordinary heat our Affections towards the things we take leave of. I take my last leave of the pleasures on this World, these are our last embraces.⁵⁵

This extraordinary essay of Montaigne's is one of a number of covert manifestos of considerable significance for the interpretation of *Tristram Shandy*. The critic who spots this allusion knows that the essay, 'Upon Some Verses of Virgil', is published in the context of Montaigne's more poignant reflections on his failing health and that it also contains some remarkably frank reflections on his sexual experiences — hence the

⁵³ The secreting of sources can also be explained to some extent by Regan's thoroughly sound contention that Sterne's fictions are partially shaped by a concern with class credentials and the attempt to deny gentlemanly status to the professional critics and to depict them as 'unceremonious devourers of the textual meal, lacking the urbane "complaisance" to which he himself appeals' (Shaun Regan, 'Print Culture in Transition: *Tristram Shandy*, the Reviewers, and the Consumable Text', *ECentF*, 14 (2002), 289-309 (p. 295)).

⁵⁴ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Montaigne, III, p. 101.

prediction that this particular essay will make the respectable female consumer move the book from the parlour window to the closet.⁵⁶

By making this allusion, *Tristram Shandy* is exposing all who pay lip service to Montaigne and decorate their bookshelves with unopened copies of the *Essays*. If an established and authoritative source such as Montaigne can explore the lower half of the body, why cannot Tristram play with the language that describes it — unless those readers who condemn Sterne's fiction and who recognise the authority of the *Essays* have never actually read them just as 'Upon Some Verses of Virgil' anticipates? However, what escapes critical attention with even more ease is the wider theodictic implication of the appropriation of this essay.

When 'Upon Some Verses of Virgil' is read in tandem with Sterne's fiction its pre-eminent role in the Shandean pedigree becomes startlingly obvious and, in theodictic terms, it also becomes very clear that Shandean sexuality at the level of digressive and suggestive language is inseparably intertwined with the displacement of the sense of mortality because earlier in the essay the ageing Montaigne writes:

[...] lest I should wither, dry up, and overcharge myself with Prudence, in the intervals and truces my Infirmities allow me, [...] I gently decline it and turn my Eyes from the stormy and frowning Sky I have before me; which, thanks be to *God*, I regard without Fear, but not without Meditation and Debate. And amuse my self in the remembrance of my better years [...].⁵⁷

The musings in the essay are avowedly a tactic depending partly on eroticism to displace melancholy or anxiety, a deliberate (if temporary) refusal of telos for which non-linear narrative is particularly well suited. Montaigne's displacement into remembrance of better years is not especially fetishistic: it is slightly too knowing to sustain the corresponding need not to know that lies at the heart of the fetishist dynamic. What this

⁵⁶ Ibid., III, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., III, p. 90.

appears to be is a construction of sexually suggestive narrative as a palliative response to a psychological awareness of mortality and the inalienably theodictic undertow of that awareness in the context.⁵⁸ The fact that it constitutes a significant subtext to *Tristram Shandy* at the very least suggests its fetishistic status in Sterne's fiction and that it comes wrapped in a context is not merely libidinal but also tied into strategies to manage the experience of suffering.

Conclusions

With characteristic ambiguity, Tristram evaluates in the representations of the story in graphs the idea of a straight-line narrative in both religious and libidinal terms:

I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of [a narrative] line as straight as
I could draw it, by a writing-master's ruler, (borrowed for that purpose)
turning neither to the right hand or to the left.

This *right line*, — the path-way for Christians to walk in! say
divines —

— The emblem of moral rectitude! says *Cicero* —

— The *best line*! say cabbage planters — is the shortest line, says
Archimedes, which can be drawn from one given point to another. —

I wish your ladyships would lay this matter to heart in your next
birth-day suits!⁵⁹

At the very opening of this, the allusion to the 'writing master' may be a dismissive reference to conventional biographers (likened to people who teach handwriting) in a form that is conveniently similar to the concept of a Master-Signifier. This passage also confirms, however subliminally, that there is considerable evidence to suggest that linear narrative has a certain facility for carrying within it unconscious or unannounced theistic assumptions. It is fair to argue that the absence of any clear telos — an absence of which is such a key feature of the narrative form of Sterne's fiction in general —

⁵⁸ Battestin plausibly argues that for Sterne, eroticism constitutes a crucial antidote to solipsism — a solipsism that haunts human consciousness as Locke describes it (Martin C. Battestin, 'The Critique of Freethinking from Swift to Sterne', in *ECentF*, 15 (2003), 341-420 (p. 413)).

⁵⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 571-72. New, Davies, and Day point out that whether 'birthday suits' was a euphemism for nakedness is disputed. What is also possible is that 'cabbage planting' may have been a double a *double entendre* for sexual intercourse (New, Davies, and Day, *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, p. 443).

indicates a *potential* relationship between theodictic discourse and Sterne's narrative form, but is far from being proof positive that such a relationship exists.

To make that relationship more visible, special attention must be given to the proposition that the non-teleological dimension of Sterne's fiction deconstructs key aspects of contemporaneous, ideologically driven taboos that governed expectations of what was allowable in texts with any claim to literary seriousness and propriety. These taboos were defined by the Master-Signifiers both of the empirical autobiographer and the clergyman author. The contemporaneous reception of *Tristram Shandy* hints at this possibility in no uncertain terms as there is a glut of evidence to show that it hit a nerve with some readers.⁶⁰ This proposition also suggests that the extent to which Sterne's fiction was thought to collude with a process of moral decay is, in itself, a manifestation of its determination by the fetish of continence which, in turn, indicates the relationship of these ideological concerns to theodictic discourse. After all, the concept of decadence, from the point of view of those who accept its descriptive coherence, is an awareness (often repressed) of the fragility of the authority of a hitherto prevailing moral system and its related cosmology.

Sterne's fiction feeds on the questionable cultural status of fiction in the milieu. It parodies professional criticism as a form of sophistry and the identifications which readers commonly make with fictional discourse as prurient, or hypocritical, or delusive and it does so on the assumption that such readings are usually ignorant. Above all, this key feature of *Tristram Shandy* is a telltale indication of a milieu in which the significance

⁶⁰ Howes inevitably gives abundant evidence of this. By 1762, *Tristram Shandy* had been variously condemned as a book in which 'decency is ridiculed' (p. 146); Sterne is condemned as a clergyman for having 'introduced obscenity as wit, and encouraged the depravity of young an unfledged vice, by libidinous ideas and indecent allusions' (p. 141); Richardson argued that Sterne's 'character as a clergyman seems much impeached by printing gross and vulgar tales, as no decent mind can endure without extreme disgust' (p. 129).

of text and the way in which the subject constructs a narrative of life events defined more by personal significances than empirical data is undergoing a profound change — a process which is underpinned by the instabilities of the Lockean understanding of consciousness.

Whether this process is conservative in tendency or *avant garde* is actually irrelevant because, either way, this is symptomatic of a high degree of epistemological uncertainty — an instability which highlights the indecipherability of the moral value of emotions and experience and its wider significance. If this is so, then the relationship between Sterne's fiction and theodictic discourse becomes more clearly visible: the theodicy debate is no more and no less than a crisis in which the moral value of emotion and experience becomes highly contestable. To say this is to assert something cognate with Lupton's hypothesis that the writings of Sterne and Hume are each symptomatic of the same crisis of authenticity which lies behind the stunning paradox of the narrative technique of *Tristram Shandy* — it appears to be a narratological mechanism which represents the experience of being *caught in the midst* whilst being simultaneously wholly unable to live in the present.⁶¹ This failure is rendered even more explicit by the contrast between Tristram and Yorick as narrators. The persona of Yorick is constructed as being more evidently capable of living in the present, but the extent to which it develops only a rather tenuous grasp on that present is highly suggestive of its Shandean character. The failure to live authentically in the present, in more conventional Christian terms, constitutes a failure to believe in an eschatological guarantee that, in the end of all things, all will be well and, in the words of the Apocalypse, 'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'.⁶²

⁶¹ Christina Lupton, 'Tristram Shandy, David Hume and Epistemological Fiction', in *Philosophy and Literature*, 27 (2003), 98–115 (pp. 102–3).

⁶² Revelation 21. 4.

That apparent absence of an eschatological guarantee — or, at least, its rather tenuous nature as it appears in the narrative form of Sterne's fiction — highlights the extent to which *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* represent the fictional mechanism of plot itself as a cognate of the theistic belief in Providence. By comparison with the narrative form of Sterne's fiction, plot, as it is more conventionally handled, becomes the representation of human experience in which causality and telos are visible. The omission, or obfuscation of this in Sterne's fiction is fundamentally symptomatic of the issues that lie at the heart of the theodicy debate. *Tristram Shandy* pokes fun at the desire for plot which is, in part, constructed as the desire for consummation — a desire that is both libidinal and eschatological and is thwarted on both accounts. As Iser's approach coherently asserts, it sets out to reveal how fictional discourse can commonly operate as little more than a provisional and arbitrary instrument with which to get a grip on the otherwise ungraspable flow of events. As mediated through Yorick and Tristram, it is not only the libidinal potential of language that is beyond the teller's control, it is the representation of life itself. Walter's sexual ponderousness is neatly paralleled in his narrative caution — and Tristram and Yorick's narrative styles work in much the same way where there seems to be a proportional relationship between narrative and libidinal flightiness. And what is more, the personae of Tristram, Walter, and even the more linear Yorick, are all represented as incapable of control over their texts.

By exposing the arbitrariness of fictional narrative, *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* position themselves in a way that is wholly consistent with both the *avant garde* and reactionary possibilities that are latent in their narrative form: they deconstruct more conventional forms either as a substitute for reality or they expose the absence of an underlying and agreed principle of reality. Either way, an underlying and

unifying construct of reality as a clearly operative heuristic instrument is put beyond the reader's reach. In the narrative form of Sterne's fiction, endings are refused, and games are played with language and desire. In Sterne's literary form, life does not make sense and it invites the consumer to laugh because, if she thought more deeply about things, she might 'wither, dry up, and overcharge [...] with Prudence', so instead she is invited to avert her eyes 'from the stormy and frowning Sky' she has before her.⁶³ Some might argue that this is one of the moods out of which theodicy emerges.

⁶³ Montaigne, III, p. 90.

Chapter 4: The representation of death

There are key contributions to literary theory that accord immense significance to the relationship of the activity of writing to the concept of mortality.¹ At one level, this is an unavoidably obvious issue in Sterne's fiction in the light of some of the very first words that the reader encounters when she opens *Tristram Shandy*:

I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, — but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.²

Right from the outset, the text proclaims that it seeks to postpone death — nor is this theme laid aside in the course of its protracted publication.³ This remark takes on an intensified significance that can be directly related to the deterioration of Sterne's own health — a fact which shapes the composition of the beginning of Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy*:

But there is no living, Eugenius, replied I, at this rate; for as this *son of a whore* [i.e. Death] has found out my lodgings —
— You call him rightly, said Eugenius, — for by sin, we are told, he enter'd the world — I care not which way he enter'd, quoth I, provided he be not in such a hurry to take me out with him — [...] and that I am no match for him in the open field, [...] had I not better, Eugenius, fly for my life? 'tis my advice, my dear Tristram, said Eugenius — then by heaven! I will lead him a dance he little thinks of — for I will gallop, quoth I, without looking once behind me, to the banks of the Garonne; and if I hear him clattering at my heels — I'll scamper away to mount Vesuvius — from thence to Joppa, and from

¹ Walter Benjamin, for example, argues that there is a fundamental epistemological divide between the novel on the one hand and the earlier fictive practice of storytelling on the other — and that a key distinction between them is defined by the way that each conceptualises death. For Benjamin, the novel, insofar as it is symptomatic of the decline in storytelling, is a function of the fact that 'the face of death' has undergone a cultural and ideological transformation (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 92).

² *Tristram Shandy*, I, 'To the Right Honourable Mr. PITT'.

³ For Fanning, Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy* is nothing less than a 'spatially enacted metaphoric flight from death' (Christopher Fanning, 'On Sterne's Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces in *Tristram Shandy*', in *Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Marcus Walsh (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 178–200 (p. 179)).

Joppa to the world's end, where, if he follows me, I pray God he may
break his neck —

— He runs more risk *there*, said Eugenius, than thou.⁴

Eugenius piously refers to the orthodox Christian belief that, at the end of time (i.e. the 'world's end'), 'the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'.⁵ In the light of all this, and in spite of Eugenius's pious conclusion, it is not surprising that a great deal of critical comment specific to Sterne's fiction takes for granted the idea that its narrative form is deeply shaped by a uniquely problematic relationship to the concept and representation of mortality.

If critical attention to the relationship between Sterne's narrative form and the representation of mortality is nearly inevitable, what is less easy to explain is the fact that serious scholarly consideration devoted to analysing the implications of this fact is not overabundant. However, it is not difficult to argue that those critical approaches which assume that the fact of mortality is rendered problematic in Sterne's fiction and that it shapes his narrative form could, on the whole, be rendered compatible with the assertion that this is so because of an ideological crisis in the milieu. Nevertheless, an approach which sets out to reconstruct Sterne's fiction as proto-Modernist, will understandably lack curiosity about the shape and nature of that crisis as it manifests itself in the Sterne corpus. The view that the significance of death has been underexamined in the critical literature is not a new one. McGilchrist observed as far back as 1982 concerning *Tristram Shandy*:

No novel ever wasted so little time in introducing the theme of death, or when it did so underlined it more emphatically; which makes it all the more extraordinary that so few writers on Sterne treat the subject as of any real importance in his work.⁶

⁴ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 576-77.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15.26.

⁶ Iain McGilchrist, *Against Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 131.

This problem has still not been significantly rectified.⁷ However, McGilchrist's own extensive treatment covers an aspect of the issue that does not really encompass its relationship with the bourgeois crisis of belief that prevailed in Sterne's milieu. *Against Criticism*, following D.W. Jefferson's line, is legitimately concerned with positioning Sterne's fiction in relation to a tradition of thought rooted in Early Modern Humanism for which anxieties about the metaphysical significance of death were of a different character from those which prevailed in Sterne's milieu.⁸

This gap in the critical analysis needs to be filled because there is a fundamental relationship between, on the one hand, the putative problem of death in Sterne's narrative form and, on the other hand, the ideological underpinning of the theodicy debate. What is more, in a manner that becomes familiar when it is analysed in theodictic terms, the problem of death in Sterne's narrative form has a key significance for the evaluation of other aspects that have already surfaced in this analysis and have also received wider critical attention. It may be, for example, that the place of libido in Sterne's fiction and the status of *Tristram Shandy* as a parody of spurious erudition are not only partially conditioned by narratological concerns and the fetishes of order and continence, they also owe something to the place that death is given there. It may be that in Sterne's fiction death is as significant as *eros*, satire, or the representation of order and causality. The viability of this assertion emerges in the process of validating two

⁷ This is not to say that the topic is entirely neglected: for example, Mullan persuasively argues that Sterne's fiction is inextricably woven into a tradition of writing which developed in the wake of Richardson's depiction of the death of Clarissa (John Mullan, 'Sentimental Novels', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 236–54 (p.248)).

⁸ Lawlor and Suzuki convincingly argue that consumption is developed in Sterne's milieu as a cultural archetype of death for the purpose of 'controlling and framing' it by a process of aestheticisation. This would also indicate (from a Žižek-Lacanian perspective) something akin to a fetish. However, despite the rather oblique references to consumption in Sterne's fiction, it is hard to see that this is an especially significant feature of the texts (Clark Lawlor and Akihito Suzuki, 'The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700–1830', in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 74 (2000), 458–94 (p. 476)).

hypotheses which will be explored in this chapter. The first is that Sterne's fiction uniquely desublimates the implications of the belief that consciousness can be incarnated in text as something less perishable than flesh. The second is that the concept of mortality in Sterne's fiction can only be properly elucidated by including some reference to a contemporaneous literary critical debate (in which Warburton played a central role) about the social function of threats of post-mortem punishments for vice and rewards for virtue — an issue that is inextricably associated with the theodicy debate.

It is worth remembering here what the anxiety about mortality in Sterne's milieu owes to theodictic discourse. The theodicy crisis is deeply rooted in the fear that human life is not under the control of the providential power of a concerned and omnipotent deity but, at best, the flawed and intermittently ineffective design of a less than omnipotent force and, at worst, the product of random, impersonal, uncaring, and amoral forces.⁹ The belief in providence places the idea of personal immortality and an eternal, divinely guaranteed compensation after death for unmerited suffering in life, in an absolutely central position in its justification for temporal evil.¹⁰ In its classic form, theodicy sets out to elucidate the claim that God has the power to effect such compensations. Furthermore, the theodicean idea of divine sanctions for evil and rewards for good, both in time and in eternity, had substantial ideological consequences for social order in Sterne's milieu, as Warburton clearly demonstrates in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*.¹¹

⁹ This is the clear implication of Hume's formulation of the Epicurean Paradox as set out in the Introduction above, p. 5, n. 11.

¹⁰ Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, p. 83.

¹¹ *The Divine Legation of Moses*, I, 20-23.

This debate was very well established within literary discourse: the controversy of 1711 between John Dennis and Addison's *Spectator* about the dramatic representation of apparently unmerited suffering places the significance of reward after death in a central position. Furthermore, following a line suggested by Rosengarten, this argument could be considered as foundational to much ensuing, canonical literary discourse.¹² As Dennis argued:

Suppose I should grant that there is not always an equal Distribution of Affliction and Happiness here below. Man is a Creature who was created immortal, and a Creature consequently that will find a Compensation in Futurity for any seeming Inequality in his Dealing here. But the Creatures of a poetical Creator are imaginary and transitory; they have no longer Duration than the Representation of their respective Fables; and consequently, if they offend, they must be punish'd during that Representation. And therefore we are very far from pretending that poetical Justice is an equal Representation of the Justice of the Almighty.¹³

Dennis is arguing that literary representations are obliged to transpose the concept of divine sanctions and rewards into the compass of a plot — and that the key to that transposition is the concept of personal immortality. Dennis defines his position as a protest against Addison's published view that literary representations of unmerited suffering were warrantable because such was the plain truth of the matter: 'We find that Good and Evil happen alike to all Men on this side the Grave'.¹⁴ The ideas of total personal extinction or of defective providence in the issues of death therefore have immense psychological and aesthetic consequences, and such anxieties are well documented in Sterne's milieu as this chapter will show.

These anxieties are also clearly documented in Sterne's most theodictic sermon, 'The Ways of Providence Justified', which takes as axiomatic the idea that the apparent

¹² Richard A. Rosengarten, *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence: Divine Design and the Incursions of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 24.

¹³ [John] Dennis, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear with Some Letters of Criticism to the Spectator* (London: Bernard Lintott, 1712), p. 45.

¹⁴ [Joseph Addison], *The Spectator*, 8 vols (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1744), I, pp. 161-62.

injustice of the distribution of suffering in this world ‘is one of the strongest natural arguments for a future state’.¹⁵ However, the continued existence after the death of the body of an immortal soul is not the only ‘future state’ that is on offer. Right from the earliest stages of ancient Greek epic, the Western tradition has been shaped by the belief that there is a kind of personal immortality to be gained in the poetic representation and bardic transmission across the generations of privileged literary forms.¹⁶ The identification of subjectivity with its expression in text is a theme that is both long-standing and current in Sterne’s milieu. The idea that there is a connection between scepticism about personal immortality and the role of publishing text as its substitute is not even superficially implausible. Žižek offers two theoretical tools which promise to offer considerable insight into this relationship. Firstly, he invokes the Lacanian concept of speech as an alien intruder in subjectivity with the implication that it has a life of its own not dependent on the body.¹⁷ Secondly, he draws attention to Sohn-Rethel’s concept of *Real Abstraction* with its articulation of the way in which a process of impersonal, collective abstract thought instantiates itself in individual consciousness and in material objects — and it is this latter quality that links it to the idea that text can incarnate identity.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Sermons*, p. 414.

¹⁶ One indication of the phenomenon of epic as a means of immortalising comes in the catalogue of ships with the names of the various Achaean leaders that appears in Book II of *The Iliad* — including a large quantity of names of individuals who do not necessarily play any part in the story itself but which, it must be assumed, form an essential part of the epic ritual performance. Their presence in the text suggests the possibility that they are names of veritable individuals which were included as an immortalising act (Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. by Alexander Pope (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour & Neil, 1761), pp. 40-49).

¹⁷ Žižek is not alone in following this approach to language. Sim applies something very similar to Sterne’s fiction itself when he argues that *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates a sense that consciousness has a highly problematic relationship to the natural systems it inhabits and that it raises the question of whether or not it is actually a part of those natural systems (Stuart Sim, ‘Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory and Criticism’, in *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [n.d.]), pp. 89–105 (p. 98)).

¹⁸ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 18-19.

The incarnation of the soul in text

In different ways Flynn and Porter rightly draw attention to the idea that both fiction narrated in the first person and autobiography, as they developed in Sterne's milieu, constitute an attempt to solve the problem of the mind's dependence upon flesh: by incarnating one's consciousness in text, one can somehow bestow upon it a kind of immortality.¹⁹ It may be that the title of 'Life' as applied to a text may have a more literal application for the autobiographer, real and fictional, than is commonly recognised.

At first sight, it would appear that there is scant evidence to substantiate the suggestion that the concept of consciousness defeating death by incarnating itself in text is a significant feature of Sterne's fiction. It seems more likely that *Tristram Shandy* in particular plays games with the everyday avoidance of the awareness of mortality — but this is hardly the same as an attempt to incarnate consciousness in order to defeat death. Tristram seems more explicitly preoccupied with making a 'noise in the world', which implies that he is more concerned with present fame than with posterity.²⁰ However, the possibility that the process of verbalisation *per se* involves a kind of exchange with the immortal — or represents the intrusion into human consciousness of a principle that is not dependent on the biological existence of the subject giving rise to the utterance — is hinted at persuasively in Žižek.

Speech at its most everyday level, in Žižek's account, is seen as the product of a 'disembodied', 'spectral dimension'.²¹ This claim is intimately related to a postulate that few can reject: that language is a system which humans are obliged always to borrow

¹⁹ Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) p. 286; Carol Houlihan Flynn, 'Running out of Matter: The Body Exercised in Eighteenth-Century Fiction', in *Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Marcus Walsh (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 112–118 (p. 112).

²⁰ *Tristram Shandy*, I, 5. Sterne also notably wrote in 1760 that, 'I wrote not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*'. (*Letters*, I, p. 116.)

²¹ *On Belief*, p. 44.

and which they can never own — a system on which all users depend but which inevitably imposes its own order on the subject's apprehension of the world. Žižek implicitly postulates a scale of disembodiment in the linguistic process beginning with the 'minimally disembodied' mode of speech which, in every speech act

seems to originate not in the material reality of the body that we see, but some invisible "interiority" — a spoken word is always minimally the voice of a ventriloquist, a spectral dimension always reverberates in it [and therein] resides the gist of Lacan's thesis that the symbolic order [which is always dependent on language] is a parasitical machine which intrudes into and supplements a human being as an artificial prosthesis.²²

Žižek develops this argument in the context of his account of the idea that humans will one day be able to download their genetic identity and consciousness into a transmissible, programmable, electronic format — an imaginary possibility created by the mapping of the human genome and the development of information technology.

The speculation is not unique to Žižek nor is he the originator of it. Its analogous relationship to the idea reported in Flynn and Porter that publication in textual format constitutes a species of incarnation for human consciousness is fairly clear. That Žižek implicitly acknowledges the historical possibility of this emerges when he argues that there is a cumulative process of the 'disembodying of our experience' which culminates in the evolution of cyberspace: 'first writing instead of the "living" speech, then press, then mass media, then radio, then TV'.²³ What is more, in a manner that inevitably attracts a theodictic interpretation, he also argues that the evolution of language is uniquely conditioned by the human response to trauma:

Man [unlike animals] is not simply overwhelmed by the impact of the traumatic encounter [...] but is able to "tarry with the negative," to

²² Ibid. Strawson, in the more technically developed version of his theory originally published in the *TLS*, describes the Episodic personality in terms that have a significant resemblance to Žižek's idea of the voice as an alien presence in the human psyche. He quotes Henry James's reflections on one of his own earlier works in which he describes the book in question as 'the work of quite another person than myself' ('Against Narrativity', p. 429).

²³ *On Belief*, p. 54.

counteract its destabilising impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs. This is the lesson of psychoanalysis and the Judeo-Christian tradition: the specific human vocation does not rely on the development of man's inherent potentials [...] it is triggered by an external traumatic encounter, by the encounter of the Other's desire in its impenetrability. In other words [...] *there is no inborn "language instinct"*: there are, of course, genetic conditions that have to be met if a living being is to be able to speak; however, one actually starts to speak, one enters the symbolic universe, only in reacting to a traumatic jolt.²⁴

The trauma in question is not, of course, the ideological shifts in the élites of eighteenth-century European society that give rise to the theodicy debate — it is more fundamental than that: it is the trauma of being thrust into a symbolic order which seems to make personal and indecipherable claims on the subject. This is mainstream Lacanian orthodoxy.²⁵ However, there is quite rightly no suggestion in Žižek that language loses this capacity to enable humans to 'tarry with the negative' or to attempt to 'counteract its destabilising impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs'. Some of those 'symbolic cobwebs' will inevitably be fetishes.

If the characterisation of language as a practice partially conditioned in all of its uses by a 'spectral dimension' and with a capacity to enable humans to counteract trauma by the ability to develop 'symbolic cobwebs' has any descriptive validity, it has considerable implications for the analysis of theodictic elements in a wide range of discourses. However, it is the sense of the 'spectral dimension' to language that is peculiarly relevant to the representation of mortality in Sterne's fiction. Almost certainly taking its cue from *The Battle of the Books* which is a significant feature of its intertextual backdrop, *Tristram Shandy* explicitly plays with paralogisms created by language in

²⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁵ It is also at least partly compatible with Eagleton's view of 'Tristram's search for the source of his wounding'. He argues that, 'this "wound" is what makes him a subject in the first place, and as such forever evades the reach of language' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 88).

general and specifically those intensified by the practice of textual publication and the development of fictional discourse in particular. As it says in *The Battle of the Books*:

I must warn the reader to beware of applying to persons what is here meant only of books, in the most literal sense. So, when Virgil is mentioned, we are not to understand the person of a famous poet called by that name; but only certain sheets of paper bound up in leather, containing in print the works of the said poet: and so of the rest.²⁶

The Battle of the Books draws attention to the tendency of readers fetishistically to assume an identity between ‘the person’ of the author and the texts attributed to him. This is, of course, an identification that is hard to distinguish from the subliminal assumption that the author is in some sense incarnated in text. In this case, the ‘spectral dimension’ to the *Aeneid* is taken to be Virgil himself and thus, at first sight, cannot be taken to be an example *avant la lettre* of the disembodiment of the author in textual form along the lines suggested by Žižek. Žižek’s concept of the disembodiment of the author is, after all, substantially conditioned by the argument that the spectral dimension is at least partly coterminous with the symbolic order speaking through the one who speaks. However, the emergence of that dimension along the lines suggested by Žižek’s concept becomes much clearer in *Tristram Shandy*.

It has already been argued that *Tristram Shandy* extensively plays with the tendency of some readers to identify fiction and text with reality. However, one of its most significantly defamiliarising moments — in the briefest of asides — draws attention to the specular convolutions of fictional discourse and its fetishistic tendency to conjure up the illusion of reality subsisting in text. The aside in question is part of Tristram’s introduction to the account of the accidental circumcision in which he explains that he

²⁶ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Satires* (London: J.M. Dent, 1909; repr. 1955), p. 144.

is the victim (even in adulthood) of Dr. Slop's indiscretion and exaggeration leading (presumably) to rumours that the sash window had effected a castration:

Dr. *Slop* made ten times more of it, than there was occasion: — some men rise, by the art of hanging great weights upon small wires — and I am this day (*August* the 10th, 1761) paying part of the price of this man's reputation.²⁷

To attach profound significance to the allusion in parentheses to a veritable date may appear to be another attempt to hang a great weight upon a small wire, but this does not change the fact that its presence in the text (given that Volume V of *Tristram Shandy* was first published in 1762) initiates a cascade of awarenesses in the reader's mind. Firstly, it draws attention to the fictional present in which the reader fetishistically imagines that the narrator exists in real time — and may even identify herself as sharing that location in time. It may even be that some readers, ever since the first publication of the text, react at some level, however fleetingly, as if the moment the text is being read is also 10 August 1761. Secondly, it draws attention to the fact that this is a work of fiction and that one cannot assume that these words were actually written on 10 August 1761. Finally, given the very real possibility that these words were actually written on that date, it draws attention to the nearly spectral presence of the author behind the text. In other words, the use of the veritable date points to the possibility, however removed, that the text represents a reincarnation of consciousness and a moment in time in textual form.²⁸

What makes this more than the narrowly personal identification of text as an artefact with its author is the way in which this device, so brief in form and so sophisticated in implication, draws attention to the layers of discourse that enfold fiction

²⁷ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 449.

²⁸ It is worth mentioning that New, Davies, and Day argue — with good reason — that there are perfectly respectable reasons to believe that Sterne wrote these words on 10 August, 1761 (New, Davies, and Day, p. 367).

and the subjectivity that generates it. In other words, this simple aside in which a veritable date is given partially desublimates both the spectral dimension of the author and the cultural/linguistic practice that gives it a kind of textual incarnation.²⁹

What is of central importance here is that Žižek's theory that linguistic practices constitute the appearance of a process of disembodiment suggests that Sterne's fiction is partially conditioned by a contemporaneous re-evaluation of the significance of mortality and the development of a quasi-religious expectation of a new form of immortality in text. In addition to this, it suggests a teasing attempt to draw the reader's attention to the ironic and ambiguous role of the cultural practice of fiction in that process. This is coupled with another metafictional game rooted in the awareness of mortality.

In its ambiguous awareness of the futility of giving a literal representation of his autobiography, Tristram reveals a sense that another life seems to project itself out of the process of writing:

at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write — It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write — and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.

Will this be good for your worships eyes?

It will do well for mine; and, was it not that my OPINIONS will be the death of me, I perceive I shall lead a fine life of it out of this self-same life of mine; or, in other words, shall lead a couple of fine lives together.³⁰

²⁹ Elizabeth Davidson gives a very plausible reading of the use of veritable dates in *Tristram Shandy*. She argues that the chronology of *Tristram Shandy* should be treated as a symptom of the fact that Sterne is postulating life as something shaped by a series of 'interlocking puzzles' and that the duty of forming the relationship between these puzzles is placed upon the reader. She goes on to say that the disproportionate relationship of veritable dates to significant events in the fictional narrative (his tendency to date trivial events in the fiction by association with major historical events and vice versa) is suggestive of Tristram's inability to evaluate the true significance of events (Elizabeth Livingstone Davidson, 'Towards an Integrated Chronology for *Tristram Shandy*', *ELN*, 29 (1992), 48–56 (p. 55)). This has a theodictic significance that is, understandably enough, not the specific concern of her article.

³⁰ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 342.

In rather unequivocal terms, this puts before the reader the idea that the text constitutes another form of consciousness, albeit a life that must ironically interrupt real living. In this passage, the creation of text, contrariwise to other representations of text as life in *Tristram Shandy*, is subliminally associated with a deliberate abstraction from real living that actually impedes its progress and produces an endless, implacable, and ultimately futile demand for reflection on the process of life. The fact that Tristram does this is of crucial significance when viewed in the light of the possibility that text was being developed as a palliative or an escape from the fear of personal extinction. By foregrounding his 'Life' as an interruption in the process of real living Tristram is teasingly dismissing his text as an incarnation of mere consciousness bought at the expense of the consciousness of real living. The fact that Tristram can make the joke at all is an example of the truth of Porter and Flynn's hypotheses about the role of text as a response to the fear of personal extinction and the ease with which it can be mistaken for an incarnation of consciousness.

Conversations with the dead, Real Abstraction, and *auctoritas*

The more disguised implications of the possibility that *Tristram Shandy* is peculiarly alive to the disembodied dimension of textual production should not distract attention from the slightly more visible fact that it is peculiarly alive to the fact that writing commonly constitutes a highly ambiguous species of conversation with the dead. Not only does the text ironically apostrophise characters that are both fictional and 'dead' such as Trim, *Tristram Shandy* is deliberately positioned by its composition in relation to texts such as *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* and *The Battle of the Books*, both of which are deeply preoccupied with the relationship of dead authors to contemporary discourse.³¹ The attack on plagiarism at the beginning of Volume V — famous because it is itself partly

³¹ Ibid., II, pp. 544-45.

plagiarised from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* — is a coded joke about the way in which text as the voice of the dead persists and extends its existence. The joke in part depends on an awareness of textual transmission in a way that is effectively divorced from the life of the humans who transmit it, or purport to beget it:

Tell me, ye learned, shall we for ever [in making new books] be adding so much to the *bulk* — so little to the stock?

Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another?

Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? for ever in the same track — for ever at the same pace?

Shall we be destined to the days of eternity, on holy-days, as well as working-days, to be shewing the *relics of learning*, as monks do the relics of their saints — without working one — one single miracle with them?³²

At this point Tristram seems to be raising the possibility that many authors can be no more than transmitters of text rather than true creators. He seems to be demonstrating that text replicates itself in a manner altogether parallel with genetic transmission, in a way that seems to make Tristram, in the fullest sense of the word, a textbook parody of the anxiety of influence *avant la lettre*. He can no more throw off the literary incumbrances of the persona of Walter than he can ‘biologically’ be ‘any other man’s child’ — a phrase whose ambiguity deserves closer attention.³³

If Tristram is constructed as fundamentally beholden for his identity to Walter (another incarnation of text), the clear implication of this process is that, at the heart of his confusion is a vacuum into which no authentic identity can be poured. In other words, if text can only beget text, it cannot be a valid or reliable bearer of the non-textual identity of the author: it fails in another crucial respect as a substitute for a discrete, individual, and immortal soul. In fact, its incapacity in this regard might be

³² Ibid., I, 408.

³³ Ibid., I, 4. Eagleton appositely observes in his analysis of *Tristram Shandy* that, ‘There is no saying where a human being begins and ends. Just as words are always versions of other words, so human beings are recycled versions of other human beings. We are, so to speak, plagiarized beings’ (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 87).

subliminally signalling the possibility that the abstraction of the subject's identity into text rather than the concept of the soul is effectively denied by something that Žižek calls *Real Abstraction*.³⁴ At one level, it might be argued that Žižek's version of Real Abstraction is no more and no less than an alternative way of conceptualising the Lacanian notion of symbolic order. However, what is peculiarly valuable about this account of the concept is that, when applied to *Tristram Shandy* in particular, it illuminates the suggestion that its intertextual character erases the individual identity of the author. It also suggests the existence of a conditioning and transcendental presence that can create the illusion of something that is not subject to the author's mortality or the persistence of a given, specific material instance of the text.

At the heart of Žižek's account of Real Abstraction is its distinction from *thought abstraction* or 'abstraction as a process taking place entirely within the domain of knowledge'. It is not something that corresponds to 'a process taking place [solely] in the "interior" of the thinking subject', it is instead something that arises from the social process that operates on and in the mind (and therefore has the same manifest form as a thought generated by the subject) but 'articulates' thought 'in advance' fundamentally through the medium of the exchange of objects.³⁵ Crudely put, Real Abstraction roughly corresponds to an assumptive reality that shapes the way that whole communities ideologically operate and that is embodied in — and can be communicated through — material objects. Crucially, it is something that does not have the character of a specific individual: it sets the scene for individual thought to take place. Žižek even suggests that it is the 'unconscious of the [Kantian] transcendental subject' implying that it has a psychic status similar to the epistemological basis of Kant's

³⁴ Žižek is using an idea that he finds in the writings of the Marxist academic, Alfred Sohn-Rethel (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 18-19).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

transcendental categories without which human thinking would be impossible — categories such as ‘unity’ and ‘plurality’, ‘causality’ and ‘dependence’.³⁶

For Žižek, the key explanation of Real Abstraction is in its application to the phenomenon of cash which is treated by its users as the bearer of a transcendent substance that cannot be corrupted or destroyed because it is not dependent on the specific, physical manifestation of actual coins. A damaged coin can be exchanged as an absolute equivalent for a newly minted one. What makes this formulation so pertinent to intertextuality and the representation of mortality in Sterne’s fiction is that Žižek, in describing the application of this concept to money, speaks of the Real Abstraction that constitutes ‘the *sublime* material of that other “indestructible and immutable” body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical’.³⁷ It may be that the intertextual character of Sterne’s fiction is structured in such a way as to bring to the margins of consciousness the ‘sublime material’ of thought embodied in the physical object of the text and communicating itself intertextually despite the decomposition of its physical sources and specific manifestations.

If this is true, then *Tristram Shandy* may be a very rare example of a canonical fiction which demonstrably and self-consciously signals itself as an almost exactly analogous manifestation of something of central importance in modern textual criticism. Developments in the critique of copy-text ideology have long since debated the assumption that printed matter, in an almost Neoplatonist sense, is a physical manifestation of an ideal text.³⁸ If *Tristram Shandy* is signalling a subliminal awareness of

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Marcus Weigelt (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 103-5; *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 18.

³⁷ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 18.

³⁸ A succinct discussion of one of the aspects of identifying — or even assuming the existence of — an ideal copy-text is found in Greetham’s magisterial overview of the task of scholarly editing (D.C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 366-69).

text as a manifestation of a Real Abstraction then the possibility that this fact represents a significant deconstruction of the concept of the immortal soul is hard to ignore: by definition, Real Abstraction cannot be the bearer of personal identity but of exchange value. To put it another way, if the consumption of text is to be understood in terms of Real Abstraction, it is not the specific identity of the author that is the object being exchanged with the consumer but rather the ideology that the text embodies.

The points of contact here between the abstraction underlying intertextuality on the one hand and money on the other cannot be overlooked. If this abstraction is signalling an awareness that text may represent a form of exchange analogous to that which underpins the concept of money, then it is also conditioned by an assumption that may not even be subliminal namely, that a purely discrete consciousness, by which is meant a consciousness with no measurable equivalence of value, is fundamentally non-transmissible. In other words, whilst it may operate as a vehicle for the transmission of opinion measured in terms of its exchange value, it cannot effectively transmit consciousness.

In the light of this, it may be fruitful to consider that *Tristram Shandy* may be foregrounding the ways in which text is used as form of currency. In the Jointure, the 'TRISTRA-*pædia*', the episcopal licence for a midwife, and Toby's renditions of maps and journalistic, textual descriptions into three dimensional models on the bowling green, *Tristram Shandy* calls attention to the fact of text as a vehicle of Real Abstraction and its relationship to that into which it purports to be converted.³⁹ Even allowing for the manifest epistemological limitations which beset the concept of performative language, these examples of text as systems of exchange tend to be overwhelmingly performative in nature thus radically problematising the idea that something as

³⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, 257; I, 445; I, 11.

supposedly constative as individual consciousness can be abstracted in the form of text.⁴⁰

The upshot of this is fairly straightforward: *Tristram Shandy* teases the reader with a previously unarticulated awareness of an apparently transcendent, immortal presence in language only to deconstruct it. It appears that, by applying Žižek's version of the concept of Real Abstraction, the text of *Tristram Shandy* is shown to depend in a rather specialised way on a cultural context in which concerns about the postulate of personal immortality are being fetishistically reformulated.

To develop the significance of this it is important to draw attention to another aspect of Sterne's narrative technique that is often overlooked and that may usefully be considered as act of exchange: its relationship to the much older legal, theological, and literary concept of *auctoritas* — the use of a respected opinion to lend weight to an argument or to assert the respectability of a particular fictional/poetic representation.⁴¹ When mooted the proposition that *Tristram Shandy* might be toying with the idea of writing as an intertextual expression of a transcendent consciousness, it seems to be worryingly easy for critics to overlook the fact that it represents nothing more than a literary variation on the process of composition that would have come easiest to Sterne: the technique that both he and many other clergy in his context used conscientiously in the composition of sermons. In other words, it can be argued that Tristram's habit of perpetrating literary plagiarism is no more than a comic variation on the homiletic technique of Sterne the preacher.

⁴⁰ King's view of the effectiveness of performative language in Sterne's fiction has very different implications: he argues that *Tristram Shandy* is expressive of the view that performative language is essentially ineffective and a demonstration of the powerlessness of the institutions that are called upon to empower its performances (Ross King, '*Tristram Shandy* and the Wound of Knowledge', *SP*, 92 (1995), 291–310 (p. 299)).

⁴¹ A rather good description of the evolution of *auctoritas* as a concept and practice in medieval literary production and the ambiguity of its relationship to modern ideas of authorship is given by Albert Russell Ascoli in the 'Introduction' to *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 4–8.

It has already been pointed out that, in common with the respected homiletic norms of the time, Sterne's sermons are a bricolage of other sermons.⁴² This practice of borrowing has its roots in much older ideas of *auctoritas* and, as with the pre-Modern ideological purpose of *auctoritas*, part of its intention was deliberately to erase the specific identity of the author — a repudiation of the error of originality — and to foreground the text as an incarnation of a truth that purports to transcend personal insight or prejudice. *Auctoritas* as a concept might also be usefully analysed from the perspective of Žižek's version of the concept of Real Abstraction and as a representation of a transcendental presence in text that is not constrained by physical decomposition or human mortality.

The fact that the practice of borrowing in Sterne's fiction can be illuminated by reference to the idea of Real Abstraction provides the basis for an instructive application to *Tristram Shandy*, a text that is at once both highly original and highly derivative. It is the product of a canon of texts such as Montaigne's *Essays*, *Don Quixote*, Rabelais' books and others with totemic or putatively 'immortal' significance whose credit is used to bestow special status to spurious, highly localised, and trivial meanings. As the homiletic practice of clergy in Sterne's milieu purported to perpetuate the life of beliefs whose significance was considered to exceed by far the mere opinions of the author of the sermon — something that offers, at best, a kind of parasitic immortality to the author as part of an act of exchange in which the only legal tender is that of the tradition — so Tristram writes in a way that counterintuitively represents his own voice as simultaneously trivial (because the opinions of which he is a bearer are for the most part trivial) and uniquely significant (because he is paying homage to revered textual practices and is able to give a unique and highly localised significance to even the most

⁴² See Chapter 1 above, p. 22.

apparently barren clichés such as ‘he wouldn’t hurt a fly’).⁴³ This too signals a suggestion that the concept of the incarnation of discrete consciousness in text may be fetishistic by virtue of its inability to disentangle itself from a web spun by the use of *auctoritas*.

If *Tristram Shandy* is merely a comic deconstruction of a homiletic practice, it may be that it represents nothing more than a variation on the medieval idea of the *Narrenfest*, the Feast of Fools, i.e. a licensed explosion of repressed profanity after the weighty liturgical demands of religious observance. However, its intertextuality could only appear to be carnivalesque on purely phenomenological grounds: from a more Formalist perspective it appears to be a meticulously constructed trap for critics. A key dimension of the significance of its intertextuality is revealed in the fact that it appears to demonstrate the irreconcilable ambiguity that lies behind the judgement on Tristram that is passed by Toby in the opening chapters of the first Volume. Toby remarks there that Tristram ‘should neither think nor act like any other man’s child’ — which can be taken to mean that he is represented as either irresistibly the child of Walter’s eccentricity and utterly beholden to Walter’s influence, or that he, like Walter, is impelled by the desire to be wholly unparalleled and utterly unique.⁴⁴

This paradox is manifested in the thoroughly derivative nature of the mindset bestowed on Walter. For all of his professed originality, he too is highly dependent on text, whether it be for such ideas as the ‘Beds of Justice’ or the battery of consolatory quotations he draws on in the face of the report of Bobby’s death (and the unannounced plagiarisms from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in which he speaks at that moment in the text).⁴⁵ Walter, the unannounced reincarnation of Dr. Cornelius Scriblerus is, like

⁴³ *Tristram Shandy*, I, 130-31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 4; ‘[The second of my father’s axioms was that] every man’s wit must come from every man’s own soul, — and no other body’s’ (*Ibid.*, I, 173).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 425.

Tristram, a jumbled incarnation of text and, paradoxically, as a result of the apparent randomness of his construction from other texts, is simultaneously unique.⁴⁶ Whether Tristram can transmit his own mind to posterity or whether he is doomed to do no more than replicate Walter's mindset, in either case he raises fundamental questions about the incarnation of individual consciousness or identity in the form of text.

One could say that, when reading a fictional narrative, especially a text like *Tristram Shandy*, aside of the material object of the text, 'something is there'. Just what *is* there is a much harder question to answer. Such a speculation inevitably sounds remarkably like a theological speculation about the existence of numinous and invisible beings. *Tristram Shandy* raises the question of the possibility of the incarnation of consciousness in text and, true to form, leaves it teasingly unanswered. The reason for this ambiguity may simply be because Sterne's fiction is symptomatic of the fact that the question of the immortality of the soul is unresolved in his milieu and that this very fact is both a potential source of anxiety for the fetishistic theist which must be palliated by diversion and a symptom of a serious deficiency in an ideological framework in which a key compensation for metaphysically unjustifiable suffering is being rendered ineffective.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ There are plenty of significant parallels between Cornelius Scriblerus and Walter Shandy. For example, Scriblerus takes 'exact Precautions and Methods [...] to procure' a child, 'For he never had cohabitation with his spouse, but he ponder'd on the Rules of the Ancients, for the generation of Children of Wit' (John Arbuthnot and others, *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, ed. by Charles Kerby-Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 96). This seems to prefigure the mindset, if not the ideology, of the Shandean hypotheses fairly accurately.

⁴⁷ Perry coherently argues, from a feminist perspective, that the offstage noises that occasionally intrude themselves into the world of Walter and Toby as they sit and wait for Tristram to be born are representative of the fact that, for 'the bonding between men' to take place, the inconvenient realities of birth and death must be banished and 'muffled' from consciousness (Perry, p. 65).

The ridiculing of mortality

Central to theodictic discourse in the Western Christian milieu of eighteenth-century Europe is the idea that death represents a crucial moment of judgement. Within the traditional scheme, death is taken to be the point in the life of the subject when good and bad actions will have meaning, reward, and punishment bestowed upon them. This fact is an indispensable backdrop to the hypothesis that the relationship of the representation of death in Sterne's fiction to Warburton's anxieties about the ridiculing of reflections on mortality demonstrates the possibility that Sterne's narrative form both reveals and disguises an ideological lacuna in his milieu. That lacuna is partially repressed in the possibility that the belief in eternal sanctions and rewards — a belief that is such a crucial component of theodictic discourse — was attractive because of an explicit anxiety in an emergent bourgeois society about the consequences for morality and social control should it be seen to fail.

Even within the course of the eighteenth century, there were those who started to argue that, whatever the shortcomings of the truth claims of Christianity, it nevertheless provided an indispensable justification for conformity to social norms, and there were those who gave voice to the idea that the maintenance of social order would ultimately be impossible without the threat of eternal punishments and promise of eternal rewards. Such a view is an essential component in the premise underlying *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*. As Warburton states:

AS RELIGION, ONLY, CAN SUPPLY THE SANCTION OF REWARDS, WHICH SOCIETY WANTS, AND HAS NOT, RELIGION IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT. [...] And therefore human Affairs not being dispensed, at present, agreeably to [the] Superintendence [of a benevolent, just, and omnipotent Providence, the thinking human] must conclude, that Man shall exist after Death, to be brought to a future Reckoning in another Life, where all Accounts will be set even, and all the present Obscurities and perplexities in the Ways of Providence unfolded and explained.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *The Divine Legation of Moses*, I, pp. 20-23.

Warburton is quite unequivocal in his awareness that the system of belief in eternal rewards and punishments makes up a deficit that ‘SOCIETY WANTS, AND HAS NOT’. From an Althusserian perspective, this would seem to be a startlingly explicit admission of the expedient nature of this ideological fix for a failure in bourgeois social and economic management. However, Warburton’s remark must be seen in relation to the whole project of *The Divine Legation* which is, among other things, to examine Torah and the Mosaic legend in the light of the absence in it of any professed belief in an afterlife and to map the consequences of this for civil government. It is not unreasonable to surmise — if for no other reason than Warburton makes the whole process explicit in his address to the ‘Freethinkers’ at the outset of *The Divine Legation* — that his preoccupations are not only with an apparent contradiction in the metaphysical basis of the ideology he is appealing to, but also in the crisis of belief surrounding that ideology in his own historical circumstances.

In the light of this it is not surprising that Warburton proffers the misrepresentation of death as a key example of what he considers to be a fatal undermining of values in general. In a passage which *Tristram Shandy* seems to echo and parody at a crucial moment in the depiction of Walter’s grief at the death of Bobby in Volume V of *Tristram Shandy*, Warburton neatly exemplifies the fear that a failure to ascribe the proper metaphysical value to death might result in a wider collapse in the system of values. At this point of the argument, Warburton is seeking to refute Shaftesbury’s claim that ridicule is a test of truth:

And now let this noble Writer [i.e. Shaftesbury] tell us, as he does, that *fair Honesty can never bear an edge against herself, for that nothing is ridiculous but what is deformed*; and a deal to the same Purpose, which his *Platonic Manners* had supplied him with.

But very often the Change, put upon us, is not so easily discernible. *Sulpicius* tells *Cicero*, that returning by Sea from *Asia*, and seeing in his Course *Ægina*, *Megara*, the *Piræus*, and *Corinth* in Ruins, he fell into this very natural and humane Reflexion: *And shall we, short lived Creatures as we*

are, bear with Impatience the Death of our Fellows, when, in one single View, we behold the Carcasses of so many lately flourishing Cities. What could be juster or wiser than the Piety of this Reflexion? And yet it could not escape the Ridicule of a celebrated *French Buffoon* [i.e. Scarron]. *If neither, says he, the Pyramids of Egypt, nor the Colosseum at Rome, could withstand the Injury of Time, why should I think much that my black Waistcoat is out at Elbows?* Here indeed the first thing remarkable, is the irresistible Force of Truth.⁴⁹

New, Davies, and Day argue that, when Walter Shandy alludes to the passage from Sulpicius, Sterne ‘almost certainly knew’ that Warburton had done the same in the dedication ‘To the Free-Thinkers’ in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*.⁵⁰ The passage from *Tristram Shandy* in question is as follows:

[Walter said,] ‘Returning out of *Asia*, when I sailed from *Ægina* towards *Megara*,’ (*when can this have been?* thought my *Uncle Toby*) ‘I began to view the country round about. [...] What flourishing towns now prostrate upon the earth! Alas! Alas! said I to myself, that man should disturb his soul for the loss of a child, when so much as this lies awfully buried in his presence — remember, said I to myself again, remember thou art a man.’ —

Now my *Uncle Toby* knew not that this last paragraph was an extract of *Servius Sulpicius’s* consolatory letter to *Tully*. [He] naturally concluded [that this] was nothing more than the true course of my father’s voyage and reflections [from the time that Walter had been a Turkey merchant] and many an undertaking critick would have built two stories higher upon worse foundations.⁵¹

Not only is Toby’s confusion another deft example of a Shandean intertextual specular regress created by plagiarism and misidentification of authorship (intensified by the pun on storey/story), it is also, by that very means, another case of a simultaneous revelation and obfuscation of a fundamental ideological lacuna, the disavowed lie underlying the signification of death.

What is more, if there was any doubt that Sterne, the professed admirer and imitator of Cervantes,⁵² would have been unlikely to sympathise with Warburton’s condemnation of Scarron’s practice, it must be remembered that Warburton goes on to

⁴⁹ I, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁵⁰ New, Davies, and Day, *Tristram Shandy, Volume III: The Notes*, III p. 349.

⁵¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 422.

⁵² In a letter to Garrick, Sterne fleetingly considered staging *Tristram Shandy* as a ‘Cervantic Comedy’ (*Letters*, I, p. 112).

condemn in the same Dedication which Sterne ‘almost certainly knew’ what he regards as the unfortunate consequences of the Cervantic legacy:

The *Spaniards* have lamented, and I believe truly, that *Cervantes’s* just and inimitable Ridicule of *Knight-Errantry* rooted up, with that Folly, a great deal of their *true Honour*.⁵³

Warburton manifestly demonstrates the fear that the failure to ascribe a proper metaphysical value to death would have the effect of undermining the value system in general, and that a key indicator of this is an inappropriate laughter — and the likelihood that *Tristram Shandy* is knowingly parodying this anxiety is strong.

The role of the representation of death and its use as a telltale whose purpose in Sterne’s narrative fabric is to betray the existence of a collapse in a prevailing hierarchy of meanings and values perhaps most clearly emerges in *A Sentimental Journey*. At the heart of this shift are the episodes occasioned by the description of the encounter with the pilgrim from Franconia mourning over his dead ass.⁵⁴ One must assume that a fairly standard humanist response to the three episodes in *A Sentimental Journey* that deal most explicitly with the difficulties produced by this encounter would be to say that the whole narrative conspires to foreground the sentimental repercussions of the death of the animal to an extent that effectively sidelines the fact that its owner, having already lost two sons in the space of a week from infectious illnesses, has been making a pilgrimage to Santiago as a religious sacrifice that he hopes will preserve his last remaining son from a premature death. This is, of course, precisely the kind of incident that commonly lies at the heart of the theodicy debate.

The storm of emotional and metaphysical questions that are generated by the plight of the pilgrim from Franconia are all held in an unresolved abeyance, and

⁵³ *Divine Legation*, I, pp. xix-xx.

⁵⁴ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 50-56.

perhaps even earthed and palliated by the attention that the text draws to the mourning over the death of the ass that has carried its bereft owner from Franconia to Compostella and then back as far as Nampont. The sequence that deals with the dead ass finishes with Yorick's failed attempt to encompass the sentimental significance of what he has witnessed — a failure created by the inappropriate speeds at which the postillion chooses to drive the post-chaise. He gives up trying to meditate on the mourning of the man from Franconia or to deal with his anger or guilt directed at the postillion's driving with these words:

The deuce go, said I, with it all! Here am I sitting as candidly disposed to make the best of the worst, as ever wight was, and all runs counter.

There is one sweet lenitive at least for evils, which nature holds out to us; so I took it kindly at her hands, and fell asleep.⁵⁵

This may be no more than a representation of the impossibility of reflecting on great metaphysical questions whilst being-in-the-midst. However, the Shandean inconclusiveness of this episode is more than usually telling. Yorick's attempt to engage in that most theodictic of activities, 'to make the best of the worst' — to examine the significance of grief or the implied moral failure of his petulance with the postillion — still comes to a sort of fetishistic oblivion. What is more, this whole incident is a reprise of all the main themes of the opening of Volume V of *Tristram Shandy* with its equation of narrative speed with the driving of the postillion, and it seems likely that there is at the very least a subliminal link being made with Walter's equation of the term 'ass' with the human body.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁶ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 407; II, p. 715.

All of these possible subauditions are poured into that phenomenon about whose theodicean value Tristram explicitly expresses such scepticism: sleep.⁵⁷ Here, it seems, Yorick retreats from the attempt to discover some kind of transcendent and theodictic meaning in the incident with the dead ass and the man from Franconia by lapsing into sleep. This incident, and its response, are not of peripheral significance in *A Sentimental Journey*: no fewer than three chapters are dedicated to it. Furthermore, its associations with the whole phenomenon of the sentimental representation of death are, for once, quite unambiguous. The reflections on the dead ass and the dead sons leave all metaphysical implications in an unresolved state of suspension. Whether or not this incident is merely a homiletic prod directed at the spiritually lazy — a variation on the theme of *memento mori* — or whether it is religiously sceptical, it casts over the representation of death an aura of unresolved paradox, especially concerning its consequences for the representation of an ideologically guaranteed hierarchy of values.

In other words, the cumulative import of this sequence in *A Sentimental Journey* is to make the true hermeneutic significance of the dead ass and the mourning of the pilgrim from Franconia indecipherable. This is, of course, wholly consistent with the argument advanced in ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ which is largely concerned with trying to establish that providence cannot be accused of being unjust in meting out suffering indifferently if suffering’s meaning is effectively indecipherable in normal circumstances. Furthermore, if it is probable that the speed of the post-chaise as they move away from the incident with the dead ass is inextricably linked to Tristram’s remarks on narrative speed at the beginning of Volume V, then it would seem that

⁵⁷ ‘Nor could I set out with a lye in my mouth, by affirming, that of all the soft and delicious functions of our nature, by which the great Author of it, in his bounty, has been pleased to recompence the sufferings wherewith his justice and his good pleasure has wearied us, — that this [i.e. sleep] is the chiefest (I know pleasures worth ten of it)’ (Ibid., I, p. 346).

A Sentimental Journey is deconstructing the viability of autonomously generated evaluations of the significance of death at the level of both plot and of narrative syntax.⁵⁸ At the very least, the evidence seems to suggest that the incident of the dead ass in *A Sentimental Journey* is left in such an ambiguous state that it raises the very real possibility that the narrative is representing the fact of death as something that is crucially beyond judgement: it does not carry any decipherable implication for the supposed afterlife of the dead or any consolation for the mourning. Nor does it have any unequivocal implication for the status and value of sentimental identification with grief. All of these considerations play a central role in theodictic discourse.

Of all its implications for the representation of a hierarchy of values, *A Sentimental Journey* most significantly leaves open the possibility that there is an implicit equivalence between animal and human death. This possibility is, at the very least, intertextually linked to the way in which Walter establishes a Manichean and metonymic relationship between the ass and the human body.⁵⁹ If that is the case, it can either be read as a nascent, totemic equivalence that was to play a significant role in the cult of sensibility as Barker-Benfield accounts for it, in which anthropomorphic identification with animal suffering becomes a gateway for bourgeois and feminist identifications with human pain; or it can be read as a symptom of an unresolved anxiety about Materialism in the form developed by La Mettrie.⁶⁰ The likelihood that Sterne was concerned to explore issues raised by La Mettrian materialism has already been established and is well documented in the critical literature. It is also one of the keynotes of *A Sentimental Journey*:

When man is at peace with man, how much lighter than a feather is the heaviest of metals in his hand! he pulls out his purse, and holding it airily and uncompressed, looks round him, as if he sought for an object to share it with — In doing this, I felt every vessel in my frame dilate — the

⁵⁸ Ibid., I, p. 407.

⁵⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 715.

⁶⁰ Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 231-36; *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 236.

arteries beat all cheerily together, and every power which sustained life, performed it with so little friction, that 'twould have confounded the most *physical precieuse* in France; with all her materialism, she could scarce have called me a machine —

I'm confident, said I to myself, I should have overset her creed.⁶¹

Conclusions

That the evidence suggests that Sterne's narrative form is shaped to entice the reader to misidentify text, author, and life is overwhelming: on almost every page *Tristram Shandy* seems to want to disclose the ease with which text can be readily mistaken for life and *A Sentimental Journey* is founded on a deliberate obfuscation of Yorick's identity with Sterne himself.⁶² It does not require much effort to see that this whole manoeuvre is symptomatic of an attempted ideological substitution of the idea of the incarnation of consciousness in text as one of many reactions to the loss of confidence in the belief in a human consciousness capable of surviving the death of the body. *Tristram Shandy* intensively signals the nature of the text of fictional narrative as a culturally relative epiphenomenon, structured by a Real Abstraction in the sense defined by Žižek, and thus radically defective as a means of authentically incarnating individual consciousness. In the deepest sense, it seems to be positioning the concept of the incarnation of consciousness in text as nothing less than an articulation of thought in another 'Scene' where 'thought is already articulated in advance'.⁶³

The construction of text in this manner can also be persuasively characterised as an anticipation of more modern concepts of intertextuality and the anxiety of influence. The inevitable implication of this is to demonstrate that text can be induced to act as a carrier of consciousness that escapes the death of the subject but that this process is

⁶¹ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 5.

⁶² Howes draws attention to the fact that Sterne was attacked in 1760 by Owen Ruffhead in the *Monthly Review* for publishing the first volume of the *Sermons* partly under the name of 'Mr. Yorick', an act which Ruffhead characterised as 'mounting the pulpit "in a Harlequin's coat" and making "obscurity ... the handmaid to religion"' (Howes, p. 6).

⁶³ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 19.

intensified by the historical circumstances of its production. It can also be maintained that, as an example of intertextuality, *Tristram Shandy* is a demonstration of text as a transcendent incarnation of consciousness inevitably tangled in a web of pseudo-*auctoritas* — a system of textually based positions whose specific purpose is to erase discrete individual identity. In other words, *Tristram Shandy* intensifies and exhibits another turn in the process of the death of the author in the Foucauldian sense.⁶⁴ It can be argued that if Tristram is truly a son of Walter, a child ‘like no other man’s child’, this is a staged display of the fact that the only thing procreated in the form of text is a kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of other texts.

Finally, it can be shown that the way in which the episodes in *A Sentimental Journey* that centre on the encounter of Yorick with the dead ass are so constructed as deliberately to hold in abeyance any coherent reflection on mortality and its theodictic implications. This refusal highlights a tangle beyond the bounds of unravelling of issues concerning the value of human life as opposed to animal life and, in the incomplete story of the man from Franconia, the significance of a religious attempt to forestall the possibility of calamity is left unpacked.

That *Tristram Shandy* depends on the idea that text can be mistaken for life and for reality is not hard to accept: even the games that are played with the boundaries of sexualised language are partly predicated on this assumption. When the Novice and the Abbess of Andouilletts act on their belief that sexual language is possessed with a kind of Real Presence — that to utter certain words in and of themselves has some kind of spiritual power — this is no mere reprise of a long standing sectarian argument about

⁶⁴ ‘Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing’ (Foucault, pp. 102-3).

sacramental language or a reminder of Scholastic debates about Realism and Nominalism: it is a parody on the absurdity of prurient/prudish objections to transgressive language and the implicit belief that words can be invested with fetishistic significance.⁶⁵

The unequivocal implication of this would seem to be that *Tristram Shandy* is designed to expose the absurdity of identifying text with life. If this were the case without remainder, it would be irrefutable proof that *Tristram Shandy* is a demonstration of the futility of the belief that any reality, especially consciousness, can be incarnated in print. However, the joke depends on the ease with which such an identification can be made and this must inevitably prompt the question: why does such a textual practice evolve at this particular time and in this particular combination of historical and cultural circumstances? Is *Tristram Shandy* peculiarly symptomatic of the cultural power that the idea of the incarnation of consciousness in print fiction was beginning to accrue — and did it derive its power in part from a need to connect with another consciousness that had achieved that incarnation?

All of this tends to confirm Parker's overall hypothesis that Sterne's narrative form is inalienably sceptical. He argues that, 'what animates [*Tristram Shandy*] is, in truly sceptical spirit, less the mind's unwillingness than its *incapacity* for holding to realities'.⁶⁶ With not much by way of attenuation, this hypothesis could be extended to include *A Sentimental Journey*. However, whether that scepticism is incipiently reactionary or incipiently postmodern, it goes to a depth that can only properly be accounted for by positioning it as being, at the very least, co-symptomatic of the issues that gave rise to the theodicy debate whose existence in Sterne's milieu is undeniable. In other words, the

⁶⁵ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 613-14.

⁶⁶ Parker, p. 217.

representation of death in Sterne's fiction cannot be fully accounted for without reference to theodicy.

Chapter 5: Theodicy and class hierarchy

The connections between attitudes towards class hierarchy and theodicy are not obvious. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: the main diet of the theodicy debate consists of an attempt to evaluate *natural evil* notionally beyond human control (such as earthquakes) and *moral evil* for which human culpability is very obvious (such as genocide). Arguments about the metaphysical significance of a class structure in society tend to be overlooked because whether or not a given social and economic arrangement deserves to be called ‘evil’ is often highly contested in a way that earthquakes and atrocities are not.

The temptation to make this error is strong when confronted with texts like *Tristram Shandy* which have such a powerful appeal for literary modernists. It is an anachronism nevertheless because it overlooks the fact that for many centuries the apologetic discourse of ruling élites and of rebellion was dominated by theological language. For many centuries, it has been assumed as a matter of course that social order either has, or should have, some kind of divine sanction. Against this, it might be argued that one of the most significant features of eighteenth-century European political discourse was the attempt to replace appeals to theology with appeals to reason. However, even this tendency can be misread in the context of contemporary secularism: the idea that faith and reason are necessarily incompatible was not shared by many key political ideologies in eighteenth-century Europe. For the milieu in which Sterne’s fiction emerged, religious discourse commonly made rationalistic appeals to Natural Law (which has a very long-standing authority in many branches of Christianity) and to Newtonianism, and both were significant elements in discourse about class and social order in Sterne’s milieu. *Tristram Shandy* is packed with references to Locke, whose *First*

Treatise on Government is centred on rationalistic theological justifications for its political ideology, and it also includes a significant (if oblique) reference to the target of Locke's *First Treatise*, Robert Filmer, the famous apologist for the divine right of kings.¹ In other words, the connection with theologico-political discourse is not far from the surface.

The overlap between political and theodictic discourse emerges in the attempt to make sense of the suffering that arises from the economic arrangement of society and its related concepts of social class and political autonomy. This concern does not only encompass questions of poverty and social marginalisation, it also touches on the way in which class identity is shaped. As this chapter will show, when the published sermons of the preachers of the established Church counselled the lower orders to endure their poverty and disempowerment with the religious virtues of patience and resignation in the expectation of a reward in the hereafter, they were engaging in an exercise that is implicitly theodictic.² When bourgeois identities define themselves in part by an assertion of the capacity to feel compassion — often to distinguish themselves from aristocratic, peasant, and artisan identities — its unavoidable consequence is a need for a suffering object (such as the indigent or disabled ex-serviceman or the victim of French

¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 54-55. Locke's *First Treatise of Government* gives plenty of examples of the dialectic between rationalistic religion and appeals to revelation. For example, in his examination of the religious foundations of the idea of government, Locke argues that if Filmer's argument for absolutism fails, 'Governments must be left again to the old way of being made by contrivance, and the consent of Men [...] making use of their Reason to unite together into Society'. He then goes on to argue, taking the authority of scripture as read, 'Whatever God gave by the words of this Grant, [i.e. God's command to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over [...] every living thing that moveth upon the earth"] it was not to *Adam* in particular, exclusive of all other Men: whatever *Dominion* he had thereby, it was not a *Private Dominion*, but a Dominion in common with the rest of Mankind' (John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Mentor, 1965), pp. 178 and p. 196).

² Sterne's *Sermons* touch on this undertone when, in 'Sermon 19', as part of a polemic against fashionable, elite contempt for religion, suggests that 'the lowest ranks', despite their tendency 'to follow the modes of their betters, yet are not likely to be struck with this one, of making merry with that which is their consolation' (*Sermons*, p. 184).

despotism) on which to exercise their virtues and demonstrate the acuity of their moral sensibility.³

However, there may be another reason why the theodictic dimension of class identity is not self-evident in Sterne's fiction and its milieu: it is more than usually complicated by three overlapping dialectics. Firstly, there is the theodicy debate itself and the argument about the metaphysical justifiability of suffering. Adjacent to this is a tension between rationalistic discourse, concepts of religious revelation, and sentimental discourse.⁴ Finally, there is the theological tension between the construction of divine providence as justice (which should abolish undeserved suffering as a matter of right) and divine providence as grace (which only needs to respond to suffering on the basis of discretionary generosity). The theodictic dimension of class identity in Sterne's fiction is framed by these three dialectics but not without remainder and nor do they precisely map onto each other. Despite this there are two theoretical tools which shed

³ Hume notably comments on the class dynamic that accompanies sympathy when he argues that it often overlooks the actual state of mind of its object and that people often sympathise with objects who are not suffering. He argues that, 'the communicated passion of sympathy sometimes acquires strength from the weakness of its original [...]. When a person of merit falls into what is vulgarly esteem'd a great misfortune, we form a notion of his condition; and carrying our fancy from the cause to the usual effect, first conceive a lively idea of his sorrow, and then feel an impression of it, entirely over-looking that greatness of mind which elevates him above such emotions, or only considering it so far as to encrease our admiration, love and tenderness for him' (*A Treatise of Human Nature: Being An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects*, 3 vols (London: John Noon, 1739-40), II, pp. 166-67). Grenby coherently argues that 'servicemen, often disabled' were commonly represented in the children's literature of the period as especially deserving of charity (M.O. Grenby, '“Real Charity Makes Distinctions”: Schooling the Charitable Impulse in Early British Children's Literature', *BJECS* 25 (2002), 185-202 (p. 189)).

⁴ When commenting on the developments in philosophical discourse in the eighteenth-century European context, it is fairly common to distinguish between *rationalism* as exemplified by Descartes and Leibniz of the one hand and *empiricism* as exemplified by Locke on the other — although both, of course, are ideologically rooted in a belief in the authority of reason. For the purposes of this analysis *rational*, *rationalism*, and the *rationalistic* will be taken to refer to ideologies that emphasise the authority of reason — i.e. both rationalism and empiricism in the technical sense — as opposed to ideologies that accord authority to divine revelation or to human affect.

considerable light on the whole nexus, one developed by Neiman and the other by Žižek.

The social and political significance of the theodicy debate is a key feature of one of the best books on the subject to be published in recent years: Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought*.⁵ In its outstanding account of the philosophical and cultural implications of the theodicy debate, it puts forward two related propositions that are of critical significance. Firstly, it rightly argues that the theodicy debate arises from a problem of optimism founded on the apparent comfort for theism that Newtonian cosmology initially offered — 'Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night. | GOD said, *Let Newton be!* and all was Light'.⁶ That comfort proved to be ambiguous in the face of mechanical disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake because the universe, newly conceived as a mathematically exact product which seemed to point to an equally exact, omniscient providence, seemed quickly to be refuted by incidents of inexplicable natural evil. As *Evil in Modern Thought* puts it so pithily: the 'challenge [to faith] owed less to the weight of disaster than to the burden of increased expectations'.⁷ It then goes on to identify something of central importance for the theodictic dimension of the representation of class hierarchy in the milieu of Sterne's fiction:

The revelation of an increasingly transparent natural order through the discoveries of science fed expectations that a social order could be discovered which made equal sense. Conversely, demands for the replacement of structures based on tradition with those based on reason furthered demands for the discovery of rational structures in the universe as a whole. No crude expectation of reward and benefit, but the general demand that the world make sense stands behind both.⁸

⁵ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁶ Alexander Pope, '[Epitaph] Intended for Sir ISAAC NEWTON' in *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966; repr. 1974), p. 651.

⁷ Neiman, p. 246.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Neiman is right to identify a firm ideological link between the theodicy debate and the terms in which issues of social order were contested. If some theists and anti-theists alike were prey to a tendency to fetishise order whilst inevitably repressing anxiety about the consequences of disorder, then much of what has already been argued has an added social and political dimension that cries out for a more careful account. That account will be greatly enhanced by the application of a theoretical tool supplied by Žižek.

Žižek persuasively draws attention to a very significant fact about the quest for rational social order that is easily overlooked: it often generates a repressed potential for explosive resentment. It may just be that one of the inhibitions that holds humans back from designing a purely rational form of social order is the repressed awareness that it will create a system in which the subordination of the many becomes both self-evident and rationally justifiable. If this is relevant to an analysis of theodictic discourse in Sterne's fiction, it touches on every layer of the overlapping dialectics: it elucidates the fetishistic aura that surrounds each — the justifiability of poverty, the preoccupation with compassion as an index of class identity, the preoccupation with the authority of reason, and the tension between the claims that can be made on providence as a matter of justice as opposed to the expectations of discretionary divine generosity. It also produces a rather surprising explanation for the vast extent of ambiguity in Sterne's fiction: it suggests something analogous to the Žižek-Lacanian concept of *the enjoyment of the symptom* — i.e. the neurotic impulse to enjoy one's symptom rather than be relieved of it. In other words, it implicitly represents an impetus to preserve rather than solve the paradox created by theism and the fact of unjustifiable suffering. It may be that Sterne's fiction, in its representation of social order and class identity, steers away from both theist and anti-theist explanations of evil because it expresses a subliminal need for

manageable levels of inexplicable suffering as an alternative to the psychologically unendurable implications of rationalistic social order.

However, applying these theoretical tools to Sterne's fiction cannot be done without caution: Žižek develops his theory as part of an analysis of twentieth-century, Western Kantian ethics. Despite this, there are vital aspects of his analysis that can be recovered and applied without anachronism because it gives good reason to suppose that some of its key elements have a rescension that puts its application firmly in the area of Sterne's milieu. It also helps that Kantianism itself inevitably has roots that pre-date Kant himself and reach deep into the eighteenth-century European context. This is confirmed by the fact that one of its salient concepts is also a significant feature of a text that is an important part of the milieu of Sterne's fiction: Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*.

The relationship between theodicy and the class dimension of Sterne's fiction is conditioned by a whole series of influences — both direct and indirect — and a great deal of contextual evidence will be needed to make them visible. Connections need to be made with texts that are significantly representative of the issues, such as Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and with texts that have some explicit bearing on the Sterne corpus, such as Young's *Night Thoughts*, Warburton's *Divine Legation*, and a key sermon by one of Newton's chief apologists, Samuel Clarke.

The effect of approaching Sterne's fiction in this way will be to reveal something that has not been adequately accounted for before: the theodictic dimension of its representation of class identity.⁹ What will also be shown is that the ambiguities that

⁹ Washington argues fairly coherently that, 'Much of the action of *Tristram Shandy*, as has often been noted, is realised as class and gender conflict'. Analyses of class identity are well represented in the critical literature about Sterne's fiction — such a contention is not

surround the representation of class identity and social justice in Sterne's fiction cannot be fully explained without taking account of their nature either as fetishist disavowals of the repressed dimension of the aspiration for rational social order or as representations of a neurotic attachment to a symptom in which the solution to the problem of metaphysically unjustifiable suffering involves a loss of enjoyment. In other words, the ethical inconsistencies in some of the central representations of bourgeois class identity, aristocracy, and poverty exhibit a subliminal awareness of the fact that true social justice conceived of as a rational social order may also be psychologically unendurable. There is a possibility that Sterne's fiction gives a representation of an ideology for which a certain measure of the evil of rationally inexplicable social injustice is a necessity whose function is to enable subjects to be reconciled with their position in society.¹⁰

Resentment and rational social order: Smith and Kant

Sterne's fiction abounds in representations of incidents with implications for social justice and class identity. It is not hard to generate a fairly comprehensive list: there is Yorick's surreptitious purchase of an episcopal licence for the midwife (widowed and 'in great distress, with three or four small children') to enable her to practice legally; the dynamics of the master/servant relationship between Toby and Trim; the recall of the

⁹ Continued from previous page...

especially controversial. What is missing is any reference of these issues to the theodicy debate (Gene Washington, 'Apropos Doors, Janus, and Tristram', *TShan*, 11 (1999-2000), 92-97, p. 94).

¹⁰ The connections between theodicy and ideologies concerning social order do not go wholly unremarked in the literature. For example, Freiburg rightly observes that Jenyns's theodicy in the *Free Inquiry into the Origin and Nature of Evil* (1757), in championing the 'principle of subordination', argues that personal experiences of suffering 'are woven into a net of relations and interrelations, into a highly complex structure of interdependent hierarchies in which blemishes and deficiencies appear not as mistakes but as crucial steps towards perfection'. However, for perfectly valid reasons, the article does not address the possibility that this line of theodicy is related to anxieties about rationalistic social order (Rudolf Freiburg, 'The Pleasures of Pain? Soame Jenyns *versus* Samuel Johnson', in *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man: Literature and Theodicy*, ed. by Freiburg and Gruss, pp. 225-44 (p. 231)).

incident of the flogging of the grenadier from MacKay's Regiment; the construct of Poor Maria; the issues that give rise to Yorick's need for a passport — including the reverie on political despotism and the prisoner in the Bastille that is tied into the encounter with Count de B**** (the aristocratic bureaucrat who issues passports); and there are the numerous accounts of charitable giving and obligations scattered across both fictions.¹¹ None of these incidents can be dismissed as marginal details in the texts as they are all close to the focus of the narrative or form a visible and significant place in the background. A common dimension to them all is the role that affect plays in each and in each case the central implication is an apparent criticism of any act purporting to be just or beneficent that cannot ultimately be related to compassion. However, these concepts of justice and beneficence, however conceived, are not only crucial to theodictic discourse in Sterne's milieu, they are also the source of a significant ambiguity that rarely solicits a comprehensive explanation precisely because the theodictic dimension is so often neglected.¹²

One of the confusions in the theodicy debate as it manifests itself in Sterne's fiction is the result of the fact that the concept of providence does not have a stable definition: there are times when the same apologist will speak of it in terms of justice and then go on to speak of it in terms of grace without recognising that, logically speaking, justice and grace are polar opposites. But this is more than a narrowly theological question: there are also implicit contradictions in the domains that sentimentalism

¹¹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 10; I, pp. 328-29; II, pp. 781-84; *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 149-56; pp. 93-96; pp. 109-20.

¹² A particularly representative example of this is Ziolkowski's otherwise excellent overview of theodicy in English literature in which, except for a perceptive commentary on the ideological ambiguities underlying colonialism's construct of 'savagery' and 'civilisation' in the nineteenth century and after, the treatment largely stays within the normal range of the moral/natural evil spectrum (See Eric Ziolkowski, 'Evil and the God of Love', in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, ed. by Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 691-708 (pp. 702-6)).

accords to justice and to charity. This becomes a theodictic question and a question of class identity once one asks whether a given theistic utterance conceptualises God as a legislator who should guarantee rights (and seemingly fails) or as something more akin to a voluntary agency dispensing handouts to the poor as it sees fit (and therefore beyond the imputation of injustice). A good index of this process is found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith which was first published in 1759 — the same year as the first part of *Tristram Shandy* — and whose co-symptomatic relationship to Sterne's fiction deserves more critical attention than it has hitherto received.¹³

The Theory of Moral Sentiments makes an ethical distinction between *beneficence* and *justice* that would have been widely recognised by many pre-sentimentalist ethical traditions. As part of a definition of 'beneficence', it emphasises its voluntary character: 'it is always free, it cannot be extorted by force, the mere want of it exposes to no punishment'.¹⁴ 'Justice', by contrast, cannot be 'left to the freedom of our own wills, [...] may be extorted by force, and [...] the violation [of which] exposes to [...] punishment'.¹⁵ However, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* creates a commonality between the two which is one of the more distinctive features of sentimentalism: it roots them both in affect. The 'impartial spectator' in making judgements about beneficence is presumed to be guided not by divine commands or rationalistic maxims but by his 'heart' and 'fellow feeling'.¹⁶ Justice is fundamentally characterised (if not exhaustively defined) as something which is indicated by 'approved objects of resentment' arising out of a need for self-defence not by derivation from precepts based on a detached

¹³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Prometheus, 2000). New, Davies, and Day are right to detect resonances between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and 'The Abuses of Conscience' (New, Davies, and Day, pp. 184-85).

¹⁴ Smith, p. 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

observation of human nature.¹⁷ Resentment is undoubtedly the principal index of justice for Smith.

On the face of it, this gives rise to a paralogue: the idea of an affective definition of justice that implicitly relies on some guiding principle of reason to identify what 'objects of resentment' can be 'approved'. In other words, it assumes an incompatible, hybrid authority of reason and emotion: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* seems to suggest that 'resentment' must wait upon something other than emotion to justify its choice of objects. This contradiction is not of merely marginal significance because it is precisely the stimulation of resentment by rationalistic definitions of justice that is so central to Žižek's account of Rawls and, by implication, of the political/social discourse of rationalism that is such a significant feature of the milieu in which Sterne's fiction emerges. What is more, despite the possible ideological remainders, definitions of justice and beneficence such as Smith's, along with their selective dependence on rationalistic criteria, seem almost inevitable for sentimentalist ethics.

What is less obvious from a contemporary perspective is that this ideology (as far as beneficence is concerned) is also explicitly identified by class markers:

Even the most ordinary degree of kindness and beneficence [...] cannot, among equals, be extorted by force. But [...] when a man shuts his breast against compassion, and refuses to relieve the misery of his fellow creatures, when he can with the greatest ease [...] though every body blames the conduct, nobody imagines that those who might have reason [...] to expect more kindness, have any right to extort it by force.¹⁸

It is hard to imagine Parson Yorick, as constructed in *A Sentimental Journey*, disagreeing with these words. What needs to be underscored is the fact that, for sentimentalist ideology, compassion is partly conditioned by the assumption that it plays a defining role in identifying class status. For Smith, beneficence 'among equals' is desirable, but is

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 112, p. 113.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 115-16.

implicitly contrasted by the greater failure of virtue when compassion fails to move the potential giver in the face of the plight of the more economically vulnerable. What is not made explicit in this manoeuvre is that, by seeing economically inflicted misery as a matter for charity rather than justice, it not only exempts the wealthy from a duty in justice to relieve misery, it also sidesteps the possibility that the impoverished might react with resentment to their situation. Perhaps in this respect it makes more explicit what is indicated by the concept of ‘approved resentment’. It is these two elements that play such a central role in Žižek’s account of the psychological consequences of rationalist social order: the significance of resentment and the reaction against sentimentalist ethics. All of the underlying ideological contradictions defining that reaction are clearly visible in Sterne’s fiction and are highlighted by being viewed (albeit retrospectively) in the light of that reaction.

Sentimentalist ethics in the form so ambiguously represented in Sterne’s fiction plays a decisive role in stimulating an emerging dialectic which, in the context of the eighteenth-century European élite, culminates in Kant’s rejecting as defective all moral decision making that owes anything to affect — even to compassion — and bestows complete moral worthiness on actions rooted solely in a sense of duty to the moral law:

What is essential in the moral worth of actions is *that the moral law should directly determine the will*. If the determination of the will takes place in conformity indeed to the moral law, but only by means of a feeling, no matter of what kind, [...] then the action will possess *legality* but not *morality*.¹⁹

For Kantian ethics, saving a drowning human may be a morally worthy action in almost any circumstances, but the one who saves her deadliest enemy purely from a principle of respect for human life has performed a morally worthy action whereas the loving

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbot (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1954; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), p. 76.

parent, driven by parental love and concern, rushes to the rescue of a beloved child has performed an action that possesses ‘*legality*’ but not ‘*morality*’.

By contrast, it is hard to deny that the construction in Sterne’s fiction of what *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* would call either ‘beneficence’ or ‘justice’ is fundamentally conditioned by affective considerations. One only needs to refer to the much commented upon apostrophe to ‘sensibility’ towards the end of *A Sentimental Journey* and its invocation of the partly Newtonian concept of God (recast in sentimentalist terms) as ‘the great SENSORIUM of the world’.²⁰ No self-respecting Kantian could allow her values to be shaped by that sensibility shared even by

the roughest peasant who traverses the bleakest mountains — he finds the lacerated lamb of another’s flock — This moment I behold him leaning with his head against his crook, with piteous inclination looking down upon it — Oh! had I come one moment sooner! — it bleeds to death — his gentle heart bleeds with it —

Peace to thee, generous swain! — I see thou walkest off with anguish — but thy joys shall balance it — for happy is thy cottage — and happy the sharer of it — and happy the lambs which sport about you.²¹

Not only is this laden with class identifications it also bears a resemblance to the opening of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and its assertion that the quality of sympathy can be found even in ‘the greatest ruffian’.²² However, for a Kantian the ethical value of sensibility so described is nil: the Kantian peasant who finds a ‘lacerated lamb of another’s flock’ would base his ethical response to the situation (especially if the owner of that flock were his bitterest enemy and competitor) simply on a rationally definable, universalisable duty to respect the property of others.

However, it is also hard to deny that there is any serious suggestion in Sterne’s fiction that questions the idea that meeting the needs of the economically vulnerable should be anything other than a question of beneficence (in which the generosity of the

²⁰ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

²² *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 3.

wealthy should always be met with gratitude) rather than justice (in which poverty is seen as an injustice which, unrelieved, might understandably provoke the resentment of the poor). When Toby responds to his servant Trim's anxieties about his financial future²³ or to the possible destitution of Le Fever's son, it is represented in purely affective terms, a matter of empathy and compassion:

I shall hear [my poor master, said Trim,] sigh in bed for a whole month together, as he did for lieutenant *Le Fever*. An' please your honour, do not sigh so piteously, I would say to him as I lay beside him. I cannot help it, *Trim*, my master would say, — 'tis so melancholy an accident — I cannot get it off my heart. — Your honour fears not death yourself. — I hope, *Trim*, I fear nothing, he would say, but the doing a wrong thing. — Well, he would add, whatever betides, I will take care of *Le Fever*'s boy. — And with that, like a quieting draught, his honour would fall asleep.²⁴

Clearly, this represents a concern that Smith would designate as a matter for beneficence rather than justice. However, for a Kantian, the psychological reward that Toby gets in the form of good sleep for doing his utmost to avoid a wrong thing (like the reward of domestic happiness that the sentimental peasant gets for his sympathy) would call into question the moral value of his act: it is open to the accusation that it represents a moral duty performed for a reward. What is less obvious is the connection of these considerations to concerns about social hierarchy and the issues that give rise to the theodicy debate. That connection becomes more visible when analysed with Žižek's concept of repressed resentment in the face of rational social order — and it gives the theodictic aspect of Sterne's fiction an extremely unexpected twist. However, the relevance of this theoretical tool requires a comprehensive exposition before its relevance to Sterne's fiction becomes clear.

²³ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 329-30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 437.

Repressed antirational resentment

Žižek comments more than once on the psychological significance of the rationalistic, Kantian critique of ethical systems that give moral status to affect. What is more, the way that he does so has considerable implications for the analysis of Sterne's fiction. At the heart of Žižek's account of twentieth-century Kantian approaches to social justice is his analysis of the theories of Rawls who famously postulates that a truly just social order must be based on values evolved from an imaginative projection into a notional *original position* of equality under a *veil of ignorance*:

To set up a fair procedure so that any principles agreed to will be just [it is assumed that in *the original position*] no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. [The parties in the notional original position] must choose principles [as if from under a *veil of ignorance*] the consequences of which they are prepared to live with whatever generation they turn out to belong to.²⁵

What is crucial about the Rawlsian system for the purposes of this analysis is that it satisfies the central Kantian criteria — developed as an attempt to refute sentimental ethics — that truly admirable moral standards are not shaped by sympathy or aversion but by thoroughly rational considerations. In the Rawlsian system (as in Kant) the subject must make ethical calculations based on a concern for the total happiness of all, rather than being bound by the Utilitarian concern for the greatest achievable happiness of the greatest number, and without any special preference for those with whom she might spontaneously sympathise. The congruence of the Rawlsian system with an eighteenth-century European mindset — aside of its explicit debt to concepts of social contract in Locke and Rousseau — can be inferred from its kinship to what Neiman

²⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 118-19.

defines as ‘demands for the replacement of structures based on tradition with those based on reason’.²⁶

Žižek’s account of Rawls is particularly alive to its emphasis on ‘rationality’ and ‘reasonableness’.²⁷ What is particularly germane to an analysis of the theodictic import of Sterne’s fiction is the argument that this very reasonableness has unarticulated and devastating social and psychological implications:

in the Rawls model of a just society, social inequalities are tolerated only in so far as they also help those at the bottom of the social ladder, and in so far as they are not based on inherited hierarchies, but on natural inequalities, which are considered contingent, not based on merit. What Rawls doesn’t see is how such a society would create the conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of resentment: in it, I would know that my inferior status is fully justified, and would be deprived of blaming my failure on social injustice.

Rawls proposes a terrifying model of a society in which hierarchy is directly legitimised in natural properties. [...] So the good thing about the ‘irrationality’ of success or failure in free-market capitalism (recall the old motif of the market as the modern version of an imponderable Fate) is that it allows me precisely to perceive my failure (or success) as ‘undeserved’, contingent.²⁸

The resonance of the idea of social and economic failure seen as ‘undeserved’ gives an indication of the importance of this approach to the theodicy debate. However, the dangers of applying this theory to Sterne’s fiction without qualification are manifest: it assumes the existence of what is in effect a twentieth-century ideological manoeuvre within Kantianism (itself an ideology whose textual manifestation post-dates the publication of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*). What is more, it locates the whole dynamic of potential resentment within the context of modern, developed capitalism. The nugget that makes it peculiarly applicable, theodictic, and effectively transferable to the representation of social order in Sterne’s fiction comes in parentheses: the suggestion that, in psychological terms, the ‘irrationality’ of the effects of market

²⁶ Neiman, p. 247.

²⁷ *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 83.

²⁸ *How to Read Lacan*, pp. 36-37.

capitalism mimics — and thus provides a substitute for — older notions of ‘imponderable Fate’. Furthermore, it also locates the potential for explosive resentment against rational order firmly in a category corresponding to what Smith would have called ‘justice’, i.e. the field of legal, compellable obligation rather than discretionary virtue.

But Žižek’s analysis of Rawls has more to give. The imponderability of Fate in Žižek’s analysis conceptualises a world in which rationally unaccountable suffering combines with a system of social justice and a class hierarchy evolved without any reference whatsoever either to rationalistic or to affective considerations. In other words, it conceives of ‘imponderable Fate’ as something that necessarily allows the tyranny of the talentless or the psychologically defective over their more gifted subjects. What is more, it does this in precisely the terms that Neiman imputes to the ideological developments in the context of Sterne’s fiction: the ideological impetus to define a rational social order in the same mould as the rationality imputed to natural order.

To acquit this line of argument of the charge of anachronism, two other vital considerations need to be remembered. Firstly, it must be remembered that the Kantian ethical position was developed with a refutation of sentimentalist ethics specifically in view and that, whilst it can be claimed that Kantian epistemology might have constituted a ‘Copernican’ revolution that takes place after Sterne’s death, Kantian ethics still contains a considerable appeal to what it assumes was self-evident to many formally educated, mid-eighteenth-century Europeans — for example, that an act performed solely out of a sense of duty is more morally admirable than the same act performed in the expectation that it will bring some kind of psychological or material or transcendent reward.²⁹ Secondly, Rawls plausibly argues that his version of a Kantian

²⁹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 18.

approach to social justice is implicit in Kant's theory — indeed he has good reason to characterise one of its vital components as nothing more than 'a procedural interpretation of Kant's conception'.³⁰ However, the question of the applicability of Žižek's critique of Kantian ethics is put beyond dispute by reference to 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit' by Shaftesbury. What is more, it does so in overtly theodictic terms, it loads its definitions with an explicit relevance to the ideology of social order, and there is good evidence to show that *Characteristics* had an influence on Sterne's fiction.³¹

When 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit' deals with the issues that shape the theodicy debate, it does so in ethical terms which are distinctly Kantian *avant la lettre* — and in a way that accords rather neatly with Žižek's critique of Rawlsian rationalistic order, it wedds them inextricably to an exemplarist and hierarchical view of the necessary mechanisms to regulate society. In fact Shaftesbury provides irrefutable evidence for the presence in the milieu of Sterne's fiction of the Kantian/Rawlsian assumptions that are capable of provoking antirationalist resentment. In looking for the regulative, ideological framework that of necessity underpins and then supplements the coercive structure necessary to maintain social order, 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit' articulates something akin to the Kantian notion of moral autonomy that rejects the moral worth of any act done as a result of inducement or the threat of punishment, including divinely sanctioned rewards and punishments:

If [...] there be a belief or conception of a DEITY, who is considered only as *powerful* over his creature, and enforcing obedience to his *absolute will* by particular rewards and punishments; and if on this account, thro hope merely of *reward*, or fear of *punishment*, the creature be incited to do the good he hates, or restrain'd from doing the ill to which he is not

³⁰ Rawls, p. 226.

³¹ Among other allusions, New, Davies, and Day rightly draw attention to certain close parallels between 'The Abuses of Conscience' and Shaftesbury's 'Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit' (New, Davies, and Day, p. 181).

otherwise in the least degree averse; there is in this case [...] no virtue or goodness whatsoever.³²

This implicit insistence on moral autonomy as the precondition of true virtue has all the potential for creating resentment that its Kantian version has: just as the subject may take pride in uncompelled goodness, so if all vice is ultimately the subject's responsibility, she has nobody to blame for her moral shortcomings but herself. In the manner suggested by Žižek's account of Rawls, there is no Fate or irrational social or biological or divine imperative left to take the blame.

However, 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit' festoons this ideology of virtue with class identity in which a moral rather than a spiritual account of social order is laden with rationalistic and hierarchical justification. As a precondition of this, it postulates the importance of the idea that desire is learned by being modelled (by 'example') rather than a spontaneous movement within the subject:

But tho a right distribution of justice be so essential a cause of virtue, we must observe in this case, that it is *example* which chiefly influences mankind, and forms the character and disposition of a people.³³

The crucial model/example in this process which quickly emerges is, for 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit', the lifestyle of the independently wealthy:

It happens with *mankind*, that whilst some are by necessity confin'd to labour, others are provided with abundance of all things, by the pains and labour of inferiors. Now, if among the superior and easy sort, there be not something of fit and proper employment rais'd in the room of what is wanting in common labour and toil; if instead of an application to any sort of work, such as has a good and honest end in society, (as letters, sciences, arts, husbandry, public affairs, oeconomy, or the like) there be a thorow neglect of all duty or employment; a settled idleness, supineness, and inactivity; this of necessity must occasion a most relax'd and dissolute state.³⁴

³² Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Treatise IV viz An Enquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit', in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 4 vols ([n.p.]: [n.pub.], 1758), II, pp. 5-115 (pp. 36-37).

³³ Ibid., II, p. 42.

³⁴ Ibid., II, p. 87.

That this defence of a natural aristocracy justifying its superiority in good works is a crucial component in an ideological engagement with the central issues in theodicy can be seen in its interrogation of the ethical value of belief in future rewards and punishments as a sole basis for virtue.

there can be nothing more fatal to virtue, than the weak and uncommon belief of a future reward and punishment. For the stress being laid wholly here, if this foundation come to fail, there is no further prop of security to mens morals. And thus virtue is supplanted and betrayed.³⁵

Aside of its consequentialist aspects, this last quotation has a distinctly proto-Kantian feel to it. It is clear that the ideological issues that shape Žižek's concept of antirational resentment do not postdate Sterne's fiction and that it is therefore legitimate to apply (with caution) his critique of Rawlsian concepts of social order as a theoretical tool in the analysis of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*.

The implication of this is enormous. If Sterne's fiction is partly conditioned by a fetishistic disavowal of rational social order, it may actually manifest this in two slightly distinct modes: it may represent either a fear of order or a repressed need for inexplicable disorder. However, in terms that cohere with Žižek's approach, this widens the explanation of the manifestation of the semi-repressed anxiety about rational social order beyond the sphere of the *fetish* (which enables the subject to function without the disruptive effects of the otherwise repressed trauma) and into the sphere of the *symptom* (in which the repressed trauma 'returns' in such a way as to inhibit the subject's rational operations).³⁶ In this respect, it may not constitute either a hidden apologetic for theism or an attack on it, but a subliminal attachment to the paradox of evil that lies at the heart of the theodicy debate. In other words, it may represent a position that seems to

³⁵ Ibid., II, pp. 45-46.

³⁶ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. x.

conceptualise both inexplicable evil and its abolition in favour of a perfectly ordered society as equally psychologically unendurable.

There is a hint of this possibility behind the fact that two of the most significant representations of political injustice in Sterne's fiction — the imprisonment of Trim's brother, Tom, by the Portuguese Inquisition and the meditation on the Prisoner in the Bastille — are rendered in purely imaginary terms.³⁷ The fictions do not attempt to represent actual victims of political despotism, they represent characters imagining what the conditions of those regimes must be enduring. Doubtless, these representations conform to the ideological preferences of the audience to which the fictions are addressed, but that added remove allows for a highly comic aura to Trim's reaction to 'The Abuses of Conscience', and Yorick's compassion is directed to an entirely suppositious object. In each case, these representations serve other purposes than the repudiation of irrational and despotic political systems and they carry the suggestion that they need such objects in order to serve those other purposes.

It may be that, in its representation of social identity and social disorder, Sterne's fiction represents a movement akin to something central to the Lacanian approach to therapy: the suggestion that analysands do not want to be relieved of their symptoms, they simply want them reduced to manageable proportions.

[In Lacan's understanding] the patient does not *really* want to change! If symptoms have developed, if the patient engages in symptomatic behaviour, it is because a great deal of energy has become tied up in those symptoms. [...] This is, quite simply, an essential feature of symptoms: they provide satisfaction of one kind or another, even though it may not be obvious to outside observers or even to the individual saddled with the symptoms [...]. At some level, the individual enjoys his or her symptoms. Indeed, generally speaking, this is the only way the individual knows how to obtain enjoyment.³⁸

³⁷ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 163; *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 94-96. This also resonates with Hume's observations already quoted on the tendency to sympathise with our 'notion' of the suffering of others rather than anything that the real person may be suffering (See above, p. 134, n. 3).

³⁸ Fink, p. 3.

It is not hard to map this onto what Žižek says about the inherent psychological dangers of a truly rationalistic social order: ‘the good thing about the “irrationality” of success or failure in [a life governed by imponderable Fate] is that it allows me precisely to perceive my failure (or success) as “undeserved”, “contingent”’. Despite the fact that the reference to Lacan contains a description of a clinical rather than a critical tool, its metaphorical applicability to the poetics of Sterne’s fiction is curiously straightforward. One only needs to ask what would be lost to the world of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* if all representations of sympathy for the victim of injustice, the poor, and the marginalised were excised — or representations of affection between master and servant became redundant because nobody would be compelled by circumstances to become servants or (like Trim) subtly to beg for a pension on the basis of a sympathetic bond.³⁹ The rationally questionable aspects of bourgeois identity and bourgeois political aspiration are sublated (i.e. subjected to a paradoxical process in which they are both destroyed and preserved) in Sterne’s fiction and this process relies on something central to theodictic discourse: the metaphysical difficulties involved in reconciling theism with unjustifiable suffering.

It may be objected that this interpretation both raises the empty critical question of asking what the text would be if it were something else and that it anachronistically constructs Sterne’s fiction as an avoidance of a variety of a commonplace, Welfare State version of egalitarianism. However, this is not the only implication of this process: Žižek’s concept of the explosive resentment caused by a Kantian version of rational social order is, logically speaking, every bit as applicable to a Rawlsian, Welfare State version of rational social order. What is at stake is not merely political, it goes to the very heart of bourgeois concepts of subjectivity: the psychological burden created by the

³⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 329-30.

ideology of the individual and of personal responsibility with its attendant issues of personal culpability and autonomy. This is at the heart of a number of ideological discourses and is a theoretical conundrum that has played a central role in Western discourse for many centuries — it is nothing more or less than the paradox of free will and determinism. It is the unresolved problem of the subjective awareness of the possibility of free choice checked by the compelling logical case that everything is caused (including the subject's preferences in the face of a given choice) thereby depriving subjects of the dignity of being causes in themselves. This too is not a marginal consideration in *Tristram Shandy*; it is not an exaggeration to claim that its entire narrative procedure is defined by its explicit preoccupation with causality. Tristram tries in vain both to fix where his own story begins in what proves to be an ultimately doomed attempt 'to go on tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*' — and whether that beginning is merely the playing out of the absurd Shandean hypotheses which even baffle Walter, their supposed inventor.⁴⁰

In theodictic terms, this is also at the heart of the paradox of grace. It is this which helps Žižek's concept of antirational resentment to explain the dynamic underlying the tension between social order conceptualised as a distribution based in 'Fate', discretionary generosity, and virtue on the one hand and, on the other, social order conceived as a function of the compellable demands of justice. A subjectivity that rationalises its lack of wealth and status as the result of a providence which operates as a charity with inscrutable reasons for withholding its benefits is very different from one which conceives of itself as the victim of an impotent or unjust system of government. When representations in Sterne's fiction of suffering as a function of social and material distinctions are largely constructed as matters for resentment and social justice, that

⁴⁰ Ibid., I, p. 5.

tension becomes almost palpable — most notably in the reverie on the starling and the prisoner in the Bastille in *A Sentimental Journey*. That incident involves a deliberate repudiation of the religious virtue of resignation or, as the text puts it, the starling's notes, with its cry of 'I can't get out — I can't get out [...] in one moment overthrew all my systematic reasonings upon the Bastille'.⁴¹ The 'systematic reasonings' in question are those with which Yorick is trying stoically to re-imagine imprisonment in the Bastille as potentially pleasant.

However, it is not difficult to infer that this passage in *A Sentimental Journey* has a substantial intertextual array of ideological justifications of resignation in view: Yorick's own systematic reasonings are not the only ones to hand. It must also be noted that the phrase calls attention to specifically rationalistic justifications for resignation. Žižek's theory of antirational resentment gives some immediately identifiable results in the analysis of ideologies that conceptualise resignation as a means of accommodating subjectivity to the threat of poverty. To make this more visible in Sterne's fiction, it is necessary to put it into a literary and ideological context. Three sources provide a fertile ground for comparison: Young's *Night Thoughts*, Warburton's *Divine Legation*, and Clarke's sermon, 'Of Resignation to the Divine Will'. Each of these texts has an explicitly theodictic import and there is good evidence to suggest that each of them has a significant intertextual relationship with Sterne's fiction and sermons.

Resignation in Sterne, Young, Warburton, and Clarke

In common with so many other texts that have a theodictic implication for the understanding of Sterne's fiction, the widely read, melancholic, theodictic, and meditative 'graveyard' poem, *Night Thoughts*, by Young deserves more critical attention.⁴²

⁴¹ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 96.

⁴² Lamb describes *Night Thoughts* as one of the two 'great theodicies of eighteenth-century Britain' (*The Rhetoric of Suffering*, p. 69).

Ross rightly speculates that Sterne's poem, *The Unknown World*, suggests its influence.⁴³

Early on in 'Night 1' of *Night Thoughts*, the poem, speaking of the 'fatal', 'waking dream' that it is possible to achieve temporal human happiness, states:

How I dreamt
Of things impossible! [...]
Of joys perpetual in perpetual change!
Of stable pleasures on the tossing wave!
Eternal sunshine in the storms of life!
How richly were my noon-tide trances hung
With gorgeous tapestries of pictur'd joys!
Joy behind joy, in endless perspective!
Till at death's toll, whose restless iron tongue
Calls daily for his millions at a meal,
Starting I woke, and found myself undone.
Where now my frenzy's pompous furniture?
The cobweb'd cottage, with its ragged wall
Of mould'ring mud, is royalty to me!
The spider's most attenuated thread
Is cord, is cable, to man's tender tie
On earthly bliss; it breaks at every breeze.⁴⁴

This describes the experience of 'a world falling apart' in the wake of bereavement — and it is a rather specifically bourgeois world. It describes the experience of being awoken 'by death's toll' (which presumably implies the experience of bereavement) from the illusion that pleasure can be 'perpetual' or 'stable' — an illusion that, if Neiman is right, is inextricably part of the assumptive reality of the post-Newtonian mindset. Most significantly of all, it comes tagged with a class identity because it suggests that a proper sense of mortality and an awareness of the unavoidability of suffering makes the implicitly notional 'cobweb'd cottage, with its ragged wall | Of mould'ring mud' into 'royalty'.

Published in stages in the 1740s, *Night Thoughts* is a representative and influential meditation on pain and mortality and, in conventional Christian terms, an attempt to formulate a metaphysical and emotional accommodation with the likelihood of

⁴³ *Laurence Sterne: A Life*, p. 113.

⁴⁴ *The Poetical Works of Edward Young*, 2 vols (London: Bell and Daldy, [n.d.]), 1, pp. 6-7.

suffering. Like Sterne's fiction it seems to represent a kind of sentimental syncretism: it combines emergent, sentimentalist assumptions with a pre-Newtonian ontology whose starting point is the assumption that human beings are inevitably born to lives that are often foreshortened and full of trouble and that also attacks the expectation of temporal happiness whilst championing the virtue of pious resignation.⁴⁵ What marks it out from older specimens of *memento mori* literature is not only its attack on the presumptuousness of optimism but the status it accords to the affective response to bereavement and suffering — it blends admonition with an almost luxuriant account of melancholy.⁴⁶ It is easy to see why a nascent sentimentalist literary culture would have responded with such enthusiasm to it — a fact confirmed by the admiration that Richardson and Young felt for each other.⁴⁷ It also inevitably emphasises the need to be reconciled (if necessary) to poverty and the idea that virtue and sin will receive their transtemporal rewards and punishments in an afterlife. *Night Thoughts* is a clear example of a work that is theodictic, roots its apologetics in terms of affect — it is sentimental *avant la lettre* — and constructs suffering and poverty as saving necessities that their victims should be reconciled to. Most significantly of all, its starting point in a disappointed, post-Newtonian optimism which seeks solace in a pre-Newtonian ontology that takes suffering for granted has a

⁴⁵ Baker rightly argues that *Night Thoughts* constitutes a blend of orthodox Anglican Christianity and Neoplatonism. He argues that 'Young was to develop [throughout the poem]' the idea that all 'forms of "evil" — natural, moral, metaphysical — can share the common appellation of imperfections in the sense that the world can be perceived as being incomplete, unfinished business, an abandoned, half-formed project. [*Night Thoughts*] often refers to life as an embryonic existence, and to man as a being who has not yet realised his full potential' (John A. Baker, 'Wishful Thinking and the Divine Economy in Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-46)' in "*But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man:*" *Literature and Theodicy*, ed. by Freiburg and Gruss, pp. 153-70 (p. 157)).

⁴⁶ Van Leeuwen is right to draw attention to the ecstatic dimension of *Night Thoughts* in the contemplation of death — see Evert Jan Van Leeuwen, 'Funeral Sermons and Graveyard Poetry: The Ecstasy of Death and Bodily Resurrection', *JECs*, 32 (2009), 353-372 (p. 363).

⁴⁷ It is possible that Sterne was aware of the literary kinship between Young and Richardson: New points out that, in the letter of March 30, 1767, to Eliza Draper, Sterne may be quoting from Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition In a Letter to the Author of 'Sir Charles Grandison'* (see n.12, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, II, p. 571).

curiously fetishistic quality of knowing-but-not-knowing. What lies behind the optimism, of course, is the expectation of rational social order whilst its prescription of resignation and the acceptance of poverty (if necessary) appears to constitute a retreat from that position.

Needless to say, *Night Thoughts* has none of the comic and ironic tones that are so central to Sterne's fiction. If it is true that it forms a significant part of the intertextual backdrop to *Tristram Shandy* then the contrast between the tempers of the two texts is good prima facie evidence of a fetishistic manoeuvre underlying each. That texts similar to *Night Thoughts* undoubtedly underlie important, theodictic moments in Sterne's fiction is hard to deny — it has the character of the kind of work that Tristram ironically invokes in an aside to 'Madam' as preferable to the freshly recounted libidinous anecdote about the Abbess of Andoüillet:

Alas! Madam, had [the story instead] been upon some melancholy lecture of the cross — the peace of meekness, or the contentment of resignation — I had not been incommoded: or had I thought of writing it upon the purer abstractions of the soul, and that food of wisdom, and holiness, and contemplation, upon which the spirit of man (when separated from the body) is to subsist for ever — You would have come with a better appetite from it.⁴⁸

The ironic tone of this is a plausible indication of a fetishist disavowal of the awareness represented by texts such as *Night Thoughts*. Nevertheless, what is crucial about the relationship of *Night Thoughts* to Sterne's fiction is the way in which it ties its affective import to considerations of social class and to theodictic justifications of suffering. Even these are not far from the surface in the passage just quoted: references to 'the purer abstractions of the soul, [...] the food of wisdom, and holiness, and contemplation, upon which the spirit of man (when separated from the body) is to subsist for ever' not only summarise neatly the mindset of texts such as *Night Thoughts* thus making it a

⁴⁸ *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 615.

representative example of the kind of literature Tristram has in view, it inevitably conjures up the relationship of such aspirations to the real, material need of the human body for nourishment, sexual fulfilment, and laughter.⁴⁹ Tristram's reference to species of writing such as 'melancholy lectures of the cross' draws attention to the fact that there is an element in bourgeois spirituality that, precisely because it is not troubled by persistent threats of privation and, in its sentimental mode, has an incipiently Neoplatonic attitude towards sexuality, idealises the life of the spirit in highly disembodied terms.

It must also be noted that, because Tristram's reference to 'some melancholy lecture of the cross' comes immediately after a libidinous and sectarian story about nuns, it is catapulted straight into the same domain as the considerations expressed about the nominal poverty of Catholic religious orders expressed at the beginning of *A Sentimental Journey*.⁵⁰ In its social rather than ecclesiological form, the Protestant critique of Catholic religious orders is often profoundly conditioned by considerations of class identity and an examination of the rationalistic justifications for almsgiving and voluntary poverty. But the incident is also highly charged with a theodictic implication: the text sets up an almost semiotic opposition between the story of the Abbess of Andoüillet, neurotically unable to cope with the implicitly trivial problem of being stranded without a muleteer, and a 'melancholy lecture of [...] the contentment of resignation'. A rather complicated array is formed in which class identities and the justifiability of suffering are partially repressed in a typically fetishistic fashion and, close to the surface of the text is the

⁴⁹ Shannon Hartling rightly identifies an underlying dynamic in the narrative technique of *Tristram Shandy* when she argues that 'in both its rudeness and pathos, *Tristram Shandy* highlights the problematic relationship between polite taste, sensibility, and morality'. However, she does not sufficiently emphasise the implications of this for the representation of class identity (Shannon Hartling, 'Inexpressible Sadness: Sterne's *Sermons* and the Moral Inadequacies of Politeness in *Tristram Shandy*', *Christianity and Literature*, 55 (2006), 495-510 (p. 501)).

⁵⁰ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 9.

awareness of anxieties about rationalistic accounts of the justifiability of suffering. The reader's enjoyment of this process is constructed as dependent precisely on its unresolved nature: it does not render itself into an explicitly religious or anti-religious polemic and it depends on the ability of the reader to know-but-not-know that issues such as the contemplation of suffering are at stake. However, this still does not account for the extent of the social dimension of the theodicy debate behind Sterne's fiction. That task requires comparison with the theodicies of Christian apologists such as Clarke and Warburton — both of whom are identifiable influences in Sterne's fiction and published sermons.

In a sermon cited by New as particularly relevant to Sterne's most theodictic sermon, Clarke (Newton's friend, colleague, and chief apologist) says the following as part of a theodictic argument in the sermon 'Of Resignation to the Divine Will in Affliction':⁵¹

most of those things [...] which we are apt to look upon as some of the greatest Afflictions and Calamities of Life [...] often are not any real and positive infliction of Judgments from the hand of God, but merely the original differences of mens state and circumstances, the variety of God's Creation, the different Talents committed to Mens Charge, the different Stations God has placed Men in, for their various Tryals, and in order to the Exercise of a Diversity of Duties. *Poverty* has not always the nature of an affliction or judgment, but is rather merely a state of life, appointed by God, for the proper tryal and exercise of the Virtues, of *Contentment*, *Patience*, and *Resignation*: And for *one* Man to murmur against God, because he possesses not those Riches which he sees given to another; is the *wrath* that *killeth the foolish man*, and the *envy* that *slayeth the silly one*; Job v. 2. The like may be said of *want of Honour and Power*, want of *Children* to succeed in our Estates and Families, *Weakness of Body*, *Shortness of Life*, and the like [...]. None of all which, are any just ground of complaint against God, or any Reason why we should not with all satisfaction acquiesce in his Divine Good pleasure; since all these things are only different distributions of such free Gifts, as he, not being obliged to bestow on any man, may therefore without controversy divide to every Man in what measure and proportion he himself thinks fit [...].⁵²

⁵¹ New, *Notes to the Sermons*, p. 443.

⁵² Clark, 'Of Resignation to the Divine Will', II, pp. 73-74.

A variety of characteristics in this theodicy needs to be emphasised. Firstly, the sermon constructs economic and social difference as partly attributable to innate capacities ('different Talents') and partly to contingencies whose bad effects are not imputable to the victims' choices ('circumstances' and 'the variety of God's Creation'). In other words, it argues that some — though not all — class distinctions are rationally justifiable with the more talented deserving greater temporal rewards than the less talented. Secondly, it defends the freedom of providence to distribute its benefits very much as it would defend the like right of the possessor of private property to use her wealth as she sees fit: the benefits of providence are 'free Gifts' which God is 'not [...] obliged to bestow'. In other words, in orthodox Christian terms, it constructs providence in an implicitly contradictory manner — as operating on a basis both of justice (what people are entitled to) and of beneficence/grace (what people can only expect to receive as a free gift). Thirdly, for the modern reader it needs to be historicised. In a manner that's very hard to imagine being replicated in the context of contemporary British society, there is good reason to suppose that some of the adherents of the ideology that Clarke espoused were willing to use the religious 'Virtues of Contentment, Patience, and Resignation' as a means of managing the resentment which would otherwise be aimed at the rich and powerful. The crucial distinction that must be made with the ideological milieu that, four decades later, gives rise to Sterne's fiction is the pre-sentimental, rationalistic quality of Clarke's ideology — the religious/ethical value of compassion does not play the role that it was to develop in Sterne's fiction.

Two aspects of the theodicy in 'Of Resignation to the Divine Will' become visible when put next to the account of beneficence and justice in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Firstly, it highlights the extent to which the generosity of providence is constructed as thoroughly non-compellable, a protection of the divine right to dispose of

private property without any coercion or moral obligation: ‘we should [...] with all satisfaction acquiesce in his Divine Good pleasure; since all these things [i.e. such things as Honour and Power] are only different distributions of such free Gifts, as he, not being obliged to bestow on any man, may [...] without controversy divide [...] in what measure and proportion he himself thinks fit’. Secondly, by constructing providence in terms of grace, it shifts the problem of suffering as it arises from class distinction out of the realm of justice into the realm of charitable donation. This shift has an ideological significance that is partly indicated by the etymology of the word *theodicy* (a term which Leibniz minted and which literally means ‘the justice/justification of God’). As one would expect in Leibniz, theodicy is approached as a problem of logical consistency rather than as an affectively conditioned dissonance: the existence of evil is dealt with more as an anomaly in the solution of an equation than as a traumatic disruption demanding moral justification.⁵³ This fact alone plays a substantial role in exposing Leibnizian theodicy to its Panglossian caricature in *Candide* and its apparently fatuous assertion, despite the most monstrous experiences of suffering, that humans live in ‘the best of all possible worlds’.⁵⁴ There is a fundamental distinction, whose importance is heightened when made in the context of sentimentalist ideology, between saying that providence is unfair rather than uncaring, ungenerous, or lacking in compassion.

The question this poses in the context of Sterne’s fiction is whether there is something fundamentally fetishistic about this manoeuvre. If there is, the best evidence

⁵³ Leibniz argues in the early stages of *Theodicy* that ‘our notions of the justice and goodness of God [...] are spoken of sometimes as if we had neither any idea or definition of their nature. But in that case we should have no ground for ascribing these attributes to him, or lauding him for them. His goodness and his justice as well as his wisdom differ from ours only because they are infinitely more perfect’ (*Theodicy*, p. 75). It would be convenient to think that mentioning Clarke and Leibniz in such close proximity could have some bearing on the fact that the two men corresponded with each other (albeit in a rather hostile manner) — however, this is not in itself the basis of the connection.

⁵⁴ Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 2.

for its fetishistic nature would be an unresolved ideological contradiction in the texts between conceptions of providence as a function of social order in strictly rationalistic terms on the one hand and in affective terms on the other. The evidence for that contradiction is not far from the surface of the texts: it appears in a number of places and is a crucial component in ‘The Act of Charity’ in *A Sentimental Journey* and in its competing appeals to concepts of grace and a quasi-rationalist conception of ‘Nature’. Yorick is puzzled to see the success of a beggar in Paris in his approaches to women of ‘rank’. The puzzle is resolved when he surreptitiously observes the following exchange that takes place within earshot:

Do not, my fair young ladies, said [the beggar], stop your ears against me — Upon my word, honest man! said the younger, we have no change — Then God bless you, said the poor man, and multiply those joys you can give to others without change! — I observed the elder sister put her hand into her pocket — I’ll see, said she, if I have a sous. A sous! give twelve, said the suppliant; Nature has been bountiful to you, be bountiful to a poor man.

I would, friend, with all my heart, said the younger, if I had it.

My fair charitable! said he, addressing himself to the elder — What is it but your goodness and humanity which makes your bright eyes so sweet, that they outshine the morning even in this dark passage? and what was it made the Marquis de Santerre and his brother say so much of you both as they just pass’d by?

The two ladies seemed much affected; and impulsively at the same time they both put their hands into their pocket, and each took out a twelve-sous piece.⁵⁵

This account depends for its meaning on a shift between the competing concepts of providence. It initially appeals to the concept of providence as grace (with a possible *double entendre*) in the petition that God should ‘multiply those joys you can give to others without change’. It then gives a hint of the concept of providence as justice when it speaks of the function of ‘Nature’ and the order to ‘give twelve [sous because] Nature has been bountiful to you, be bountiful to a poor man’. This ambiguously hints at precisely that idea of social order corresponding to natural order that Neiman imputes

⁵⁵ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 142-43.

to post-Newtonian ideology. The appeal to justice is also hinted at by the undertone of sentimental resentment that Smith attributes to the domain of justice rather than beneficence. It also uses those concepts to help represent concepts of beneficence that are almost exclusively defined in terms of class identity: the uncompelled generosity of the ladies, despite the fact that they are seduced by flattery, not only confirms their social superiority over the poor man, it is also used to confirm their social (and possibly libidinal) aspirations aroused by mention of a Marquis and his brother. More fundamentally still, it leaves the question of the justifiability of this social arrangement partially repressed within a fetishistic manoeuvre. The tensions between affective and rational conceptions of grace as functions of both social order and theodicy also flow back into other areas of the intertextual environment.

However, not all of those expressions are fetishistic. In some cases the awareness of the repressed trauma is not counterbalanced in the form of knowing-but-not-knowing that is so characteristic of fetishes. The benefit of the more symptomatic — rather than fetishistic — manifestations of the political/social dimension to the theodicy debate in the milieu of Sterne's fiction is that they can be easier to read. Warburton's *Divine Legation* is a good example of this as well as being a significant feature of the intertextual environment of Sterne's fiction — New, Davies, and Day quite rightly argue that 'Warburton was very much on Sterne's mind as he sat down to write' the third instalment of *Tristram Shandy* and, in Book IX of *Tristram Shandy*, Tristram claims the right for his book to 'swim down the gutter of time along with [the *Legation of Moses*]'.⁵⁶

It may seem to some that Warburton's published apologetic for belief in eternal rewards and punishments constitutes a curiously unblushing admission of its character as an ideological and political expedient: *The Divine Legation* predicates at least part of its

⁵⁶ New, Davies, and Day, *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, p. 341; *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 754.

significance on the belief that the existing social and political order was fundamentally inadequate and, to an extent, depended on creating in the minds of its subjects a resigned acceptance offset by an expectation that all wrongs would be righted by an omniscient being in a ‘future state’ after biological death. As it states in a passage already quoted:

AS RELIGION, ONLY, CAN SUPPLY THE SANCTION OF REWARDS, WHICH SOCIETY WANTS, AND HAS NOT, RELIGION IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT. [...] And therefore human Affairs not being dispensed, at present, agreeably to [the] Superintendence [of a benevolent, just, and omnipotent Providence, the thinking human] must conclude, that Man shall exist after Death, to be brought to a future Reckoning in another Life, where all Accounts will be set even, and all the present Obscurities and perplexities in the Ways of Providence unfolded and explained.⁵⁷

The fact that this is such an undisguised appeal to the expedience of religious institutions as instruments of social control may point to the fact that it should be read in Žižek’s terms more as a symptom than as a fetish. Its awareness of the trauma of a challenge to the existing social order is, to some extent, too explicit and too knowing for a fetish. That this underpins a tendency that might in other places be expressed as symptoms of discontent with the existing order is more clearly revealed when *The Divine Legation* takes up this theme much further on in its analysis and, what is more, supports its contention with a quotation from Wollaston’s *Religion of Nature Delineated* — and the significance of Wollaston for Sterne’s published approach to theodicy has already been shown.⁵⁸

As one would expect, *The Divine Legation*’s analysis develops into an apologetic rationalisation in favour of ecclesiastical establishment at the heart of which is an explicit appeal to anxieties about the difficulties of forming a civil society without the culturally regulative power of religious belief and the institutions designed to foster it:

if we consider that this [Religious] Society [e.g. the Christian Church] is composed of the same Individuals which compose the Civil [i.e. citizens

⁵⁷ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, 1, pp. 20-23.

⁵⁸ See Chapter 1 above, pp. 25-26.

of the state], and destitute of all coercive Power; we must needs see, that such a Society, abandoned to its own Fortune, without support or Protection would in no long time be swallowed up and lost. Of this Opinion was a very able writer [i.e. Wollaston], whose Knowledge of human Nature was unquestionable: *Were it not*, says he, *for that sense of Virtue, which is principally preserved, so far as it is preserved BY NATIONAL FORMS AND HABITS OF RELIGION, Men would soon lose it all, run wild, prey on one another, and do what else the worst of Savages do.*⁵⁹

This is as clear a statement of one of the specific anxieties underlying the theodicy debate as one is likely to find. Its setting in the context of a defence of ecclesiastical establishment in the United Kingdom and its frank admission that these institutions depend on State coercion in order to flourish clearly show the role that the metaphysical debate about divine providence and justice played in defence of the constitutional arrangement. In other words, Warburton's far from unique admission points towards a crucial dimension of the theodicy debate in Sterne's context that is easy to overlook if it is read in terms that stay within the narrow compass of the technical demands of the Philosophy of Religion. Its implications for the elucidation of Sterne's fiction become clearer when seen in the light of a significant Marxist misreading of *Tristram Shandy* — a misreading defined by its tendency to assume that Sterne's fiction is a superstructural expression of an irrationality repressing the awareness of the need for rational social order.

Marxist readings and Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*

A typical example of critical approaches that see Sterne's fiction as a critique of irrationalism is found in Landry and MacLean's account of the controversies surrounding obstetric practice that lie behind *Tristram Shandy*. At first sight, 'Of Forceps, Patents, and Paternity' would appear to offer significant and valuable evidence for a theodictic reading of the representation of class hierarchy in *Tristram Shandy*. On the

⁵⁹ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, II, p. 250.

assumption that midwifery has a socially totemic significance in Sterne, as it does in much other literary and political writing, it postulates that Tristram's narrative involves a deliberate suppression of highly distressing cruces in that debate (instances where infants were decapitated by forceps, and the horrors of delivering deformed foetuses, etc.) and this strange amnesia, central to the fiction, 'begins to seem itself an act of historical repression, a fictional *warding off* of unthinkably grotesque historical possibility'.⁶⁰ For Landry and MacLean, this apotropaic process (i.e. the attempt to ward off evil) is symptomatic of a subtle encryption of the pains attendant on social change and the maintenance of bourgeois social order.

However, the insistence by certain narrowly Marxist approaches on reading the representation of class in Sterne's fiction as a repression of the awareness of the possibility of rational social order in a form acceptable to Marxists seems to overlook the more frequently repressed possibilities of pure rationality — a repression that seems to have escaped some of the earliest readers of Sterne's fiction. Thomas Jefferson's analysis of the encounter between Yorick and the Franciscan friar is very telling in this regard:

We are [...] sorrowful at the rebuke [initially given by Parson Yorick to the Franciscan], and secretly resolve *we* will never do so: we are pleased with the subsequent atonement, and view with emulation a soul candidly acknowledging it's [*sic*] fault, and making a just reparation.⁶¹

Much could be made of the fact that this was written by the main author of the American Declaration of Independence with its appeal to a rationalistic (and Lockean) concept of social order. What is so notable is the fact that it weighs the affective, sentimental dynamic represented in the incident with the Franciscan over the more transparently rationalistic, meritocratic, and Kantian/Rawlsian basis of reserving financial assistance for those who are not voluntarily poor. As has already been asserted,

⁶⁰ Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, 'Of Forceps, Patents, and Paternity: *Tristram Shandy*', in *ECS*, 23 (1990), 522-43 (p. 537). The italics are mine.

⁶¹ Quoted in Howes, p. 215.

what is at stake is not a predominantly theological dynamic but a dialectic between reason and affect. But there is another dimension to this that certain Marxist analyses of the kind of ‘Of Forceps, Patents, and Paternity’ are predisposed to overlook: they are not especially well suited to explain some of the implications of Shaftesburian philosophy which also played a highly significant role in the milieu of Sterne’s fiction.

The nexus between rationalism, class status, popular Christianity, and theodictic discourse emerges in Shaftesbury’s argument that traditional Christianity was failing as a means of explaining metaphysically unjustifiable suffering, and that the true significance of unjustifiable suffering was beyond the common ken. In Barker-Benfield’s perfectly valid reading of Shaftesbury’s view that ‘Stoic’ Christianity, whilst appropriate for his servants and for ‘the great mass of mankind’, was beneath the intellectual — and thus rationalistic — capacities of ‘the educated gentleman’.⁶² The allusion to neo-Stoicism here, of course, involves at its heart an attitude to suffering and is synonymous with resignation, social passivity, and courage. The implication of this version of the theodicy debate is that those who cannot achieve a certain level of rationalism will also be exempt from the resentment it is capable of generating.

The account of theism in ‘An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit’ is notable for its detachment: it is an almost phenomenological description laced with ethical critiques and comments on the value of theism in sustaining social and psychological equilibrium. What is more, the intertextual dialectic that is developed in *The Divine Legation*’s sideswipe at Shaftesburian notions of the role of ridicule as a test of intellectual validity and the ironised manifestation of that textual moment in *Tristram Shandy* has also

⁶² Barker-Benfield, p. 108.

been established as part of the same backdrop.⁶³ What needs to be added is the fact that, in Shaftesbury, this again comes with class-defined markers.

All politeness is owing to liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of *amicable collision*. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring rust upon mens understandings. 'Tis a destroying of civility, good breeding, and even charity it-self, under pretence of maintaining it. [...] In a Gentleman we allow of pleasantry and raillery, as being manag'd always with good breeding, and never gross or clownish.⁶⁴

However, the issues articulated in Shaftesbury have a significance that extends to *A Sentimental Journey* as well. New suggests that this passage underlies Yorick's observations on matriarchy in the Parisian shop, but it seems to be more explicitly behind the more theodictically significant exchange between Yorick and the Count de B**** in *A Sentimental Journey*:⁶⁵

See, Mons. le Compte, said I, rising up [to explain the excessive *polis*/urbanity of the French] and laying before him upon the table [a few of King William's shillings] — by jingling and rubbing one against another for seventy years together in one body's pocket or another's, they are become so much alike, you can scarce distinguish one shilling from another.

The English [by contrast], like antient medals, kept more apart, and passing but few peoples hands, preserve the first sharpness which the fine hand of nature has given them.⁶⁶

If this is written in the light of the Shaftesburian simile, it constitutes an ironic sideswipe at its aristocratic provenance and with the implication that the French are too easily accommodated to a feudal ideology.⁶⁷ However, the theodictic significance of these

⁶³ Warburton, I, pp. xxxii-xxxiii; *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 421-22. See also above, Chapter 4, pp. 121-23.

⁶⁴ Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Treatise II viz *Sensus Communis*; An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour' in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 4 vols ([n.p.]: [n.pub.] 1758), I, pp. 40-101 (pp. 44-46).

⁶⁵ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 73; New, notes to *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 306-7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶⁷ Gerard is right to observe that contemporary depictions of scenes from *A Sentimental Journey* set out to convey the idea that sentimental bonds erase social barriers — and that a depiction from 1803 of the encounter between Yorick and the Count de B**** is a clear example of this. Gerard rightly argues that William Marshall Craig's picture 'suggests a transcendence of

exchanges requires a slightly closer definition of class identity as it is constructed in *A Sentimental Journey*. Frank's analysis is particularly rich in this respect despite the fact that it does not go on to make any explicit connections with the theodicy debate.⁶⁸

Frank has rightly pointed out that Yorick is designed as an object of pity which can simultaneously claim the moral aura of decent, spiritualised poverty whilst at the same time being exempted from the deepest demands of the importunate poor, 'the impecunious gentleman [who] imitates the poor with an arch passivity in order to ward them off and triumphantly differentiate himself from them'.⁶⁹ The apotropaic quality of this identity is what gives it its theodictic quality. Yorick is at once both like unto the poor and radically dissimilar — a distinction that is underscored by the representation of English class boundaries alluded to in the Shaftesburian exchange with the Count de B****. The apotropaic significance of this takes on an unexpected significance in the light of Žižek's theory about the psychologically unbearable consequences of a purely rationalistic justification for ethical decision making: the combination of an implied moral superiority that partly depends on the impecunious, bourgeois identity suggests that the disjunction between the status of the moral and the social identities is indispensable to the process.⁷⁰ In other words, the social and economic vulnerability of Yorick lacks rationalistic justification whilst at the same time giving him a moral

⁶⁷ Continued from previous page...

social status through the illustration of a democratizing emotional and moral similarity among all people'. However, the textual representation of the encounter is full of disjunctions that the pictorial representation overlooks — the Count de B****'s inability to understand music, the teasing disagreement about *politesse* which precipitates the abrupt ending of the interview (W.B. Gerard, 'Benevolent Vision: The Ideology of Sentimentality in Contemporary Illustrations of *A Sentimental Journey* and *The Man of Feeling*', *ECentF*, 14 (2002), 533-74 (p. 546)).

⁶⁸ Judith Frank, *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century English Satiric Fiction and the Poor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

advantage. Barker-Benfield, alluding to Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society*, has quite rightly argued that a vital part of middle class identity in eighteenth-century England was grounded on the assumption that suffering, in the form of poverty, '“was an inescapable part of life” *for others* [and] was a feature [...] on which the cultivators of sensibility depended'.⁷¹ This neatly encompasses the same contradiction that Frank's analysis points towards — the social injustice of poverty as a justification for moral status. However, this is also implicit in Toby's attempt to account for his own economic and financial status.

Grace and libido in the avoidance of antirational resentment

In one of the most explicitly theodictic passages in *Tristram Shandy*, constructions of providence as both beneficent and just play a central role. It provides good evidence to support the theoretical validity of Žižek's concept of antirational resentment as a tool for elucidating Sterne. It depends on the text's invitation to sympathise almost unreservedly with Toby's point of view (justified by his sentimental good will) as a result of which irrationality, the role of affect rather than Shaftesburian/Kantian detachment as an ethical guide, and the unresolved paradox of justice and grace in explicitly theodictic language all come to the fore:

When I reflect, brother *Toby*, upon MAN [said my father]; and take a view of that dark side of him which represents his life as open to so many causes of trouble — when I consider, brother *Toby*, how oft we eat the bread of affliction, and that we are born to it, as to the portion of our inheritance — I was born to nothing, quoth my uncle *Toby*, interrupting my father — but my commission. Zooks! said my father, did not my father leave you a hundred and twenty pounds a year? — What could I have done without it? replied my uncle *Toby* — That's another concern, said my father testily — But I say, *Toby*, when one runs over the catalogue of cross reckonings and sorrowful *items* with which the heart of man is over-charged, 'tis wonderful by what hidden resources the mind is enabled to stand it out, and bear itself up, as it does against the impositions of our nature. — 'Tis by the assistance of Almighty God, cried my uncle *Toby*, looking up, and pressing the palms of his hands

⁷¹ Barker-Benfield, p. xxii (italics are mine).

close together — 'tis not from our own strength, brother *Shandy* — a sentinel in a wooden centry-box, might as well pretend to stand it out against a detachment of fifty men, — we are upheld by the grace and assistance of the best of Beings.

— That is cutting the knot, said my father, instead of untying it.⁷²

Walter's objection that the fideistic Toby is merely 'cutting the [Gordian] knot' of the problem of evil instead of 'untying' it is, of course, a typically rationalistic objection to the traditional Christian recourse to faith. What is even more central is the implicit contradiction in Toby's assertions: the implication that his £120 per year is a matter of necessity that a just providence is obliged to bestow as opposed to his later recourse to the concept of pure grace. The enumeration of a sum of money is not insignificant here. For many people in England in the 1760s a guaranteed income of £120 per annum would have been a very large sum of money — after all, the character of Jonathan, the coachman in *Tristram Shandy*, can conceive of £8 per year as an acceptable income (presumably with no deduction for board and lodging).⁷³ In this small aside, the opposition between providence as beneficence/grace and providence as justice is visible, if partially repressed.

The same contradiction is below the surface of *Tristram Shandy's* use of the term 'providence'. In a couple of instances it is clearly used as a synonym for 'grace' where the text implicitly describes health and talent as discretionary gifts of providence and where Tristram invokes it as part of a wish for national prosperity.⁷⁴ In another instance, in the course of Trim's much interrupted story about the King of Bohemia and his seven castles, it is used ironically with the implicit sense of a power capable of rectifying wrongs, i.e. as an expression of justice rather than grace:

a certain priest [said my uncle Toby], whose name was Schwartz, shew'd the use of powder to the Venetians, in their war against the Genoese; but

⁷² *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 332.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 437-38.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 405; p. 342.

'tis certain he was not the first; because if we are to believe Don Pedro, the bishop of Leon — How came priests and bishops, an' please your honour, to trouble their heads so much about gun-powder? God knows, said my uncle Toby — his providence brings good out of every thing.⁷⁵

All of the ideological tension between providence constructed as generosity and as justice are implicit in *Tristram Shandy*. Affect plays at most a highly marginal role in these constructions and they bear the stamp of a more strictly rationalistic ideology. However, the fetishistic disavowal becomes more visible when they are set next to textual moments of suffering and injustice defined in class terms in which affect plays a far more decisive role. The theodictic implications of the representation of class and social order come thickest and fastest in the various incidents surrounding Yorick's trip to Versailles in *A Sentimental Journey* which is highly charged with affective considerations.

The issues that surround Yorick's quest for a passport — including the reverie on the starling — constitute what is perhaps the most intensely politicised sequence in Sterne's fiction and is the most fertile area for the application of Žižek's theory about antirational resentment. By the use of synecdoche, in the reverie on the starling in *A Sentimental Journey* and its designated association with the limitations placed by illness or disability and the imprisonment of a purely notional political prisoner, a certain distance from an underlying sense of resentment is created without wholly repressing it. There is a wide spectrum of issues caught up in this sequence. It begins with Yorick's courteous elisions around the fact that, despite being an inoffensive and invalided traveller, without a passport he might be thrown in the Bastille because, as La Fleur whispers in his ear, 'no body could oppose the king of France'.⁷⁶ It includes the irrationality and injustice that leaves the impoverished and decorated retired army officer (the Chevalier of St. Louis) selling pasties at the gates of Versailles because the

⁷⁵ Ibid., II, pp. 689-90.

⁷⁶ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 92.

king of France, despite being ‘the most generous of princes’ did not have sufficient to ‘relieve or reward every one’ — a claim subsequently brought into question by the fact that the nearly indigent ex-officer’s subtle demonstration is finally rewarded with a pension comparable in value to Toby’s £120 per year.⁷⁷ This incident is set next to a sentimentalised story of an impoverished Breton aristocrat recovering his fortunes by means which would excite the respect of a good bourgeois: emigration, hard work, and commerce.⁷⁸ A crucial brushstroke in this sequence is the Chevalier’s observation that the only alternative to selling pasties, unless the king of France could help, was in the hands of ‘Providence’.⁷⁹ The sequence is shaped by representations of half-voiced resentment and half-voiced appeals to reason set ironically against references to providence — and it is festooned with references to class-defined identities and values. It edges towards an appeal to rational social order without going the whole way. However, this does not account for another vital dimension of Sterne’s fiction: its libidinal import. This too is laden with theodictic issues tied into class identity.

There is an inevitable tension for the reader of *Tristram Shandy* whose awareness is alive to the libidinal undertones in the Poor Maria incident and discomfited by them. (It is worth remembering that these are distinctly downplayed in the account of Poor

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 107-8.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

Maria in *A Sentimental Journey*.) Most famously, in the encounter in *Tristram Shandy* there is the teasing allusion to Maria's goat, a famous symbol of lust:

MARIA made a cadence [on her pipe] so melancholy, so tender and querulous, that I sprung out the chaise to help her, and found myself sitting betwixt her and her goat before I relapsed from my enthusiasm.
 MARIA look'd wistfully for some time at me, and then at her goat — and then at me — and then at her goat again, and so on, alternately,
 — Well, Maria, said I softly — What resemblance do you find?
 I do intreat the reader to believe me, that it was from the humblest conviction of what a *Beast* man is, — that I ask'd the question.⁸⁰

It is easy to imagine that chaster forms of sentimentalism would be inclined to repudiate Sterne's fiction: there is something distinctly uncomfortable about the luxuriating and subliminally eroticised sympathy for Maria. What is notable is the extent to which questions of rational justice are caught within the fetish: questions of the destruction effected by traditional parental and hierarchical structures which have led to the forbidding of the banns and which consequently precipitate the madness of Maria. The way in which altruistic concern for a victim coexists with its libidinal negation suggests that the construct of Maria is particularly well suited to sublate questions about the possibility of a genuinely rational ethical assessment of the incidents that precipitate the psychological breakdown. This incident seems to indicate the extent to which the ethics of sentimentalism as they are constructed in Sterne's fiction represses the rationalistic alternative, shorn of all affective/libidinal elements, and thus removes from direct view the potentially 'explosive resentment' that might be prompted by a narrowly rationalistic social order.

Conclusions

The Theory of Moral Sentiments articulates something that is scattered fairly liberally across Sterne's fiction: the charitable act prompted by the compassion of a social superior

⁸⁰ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 783-84.

directed towards servants or towards the poor. It points to the ideological possibility that sentimental ethics are simultaneously class-defined and peculiarly well suited to sublate the awareness that some kinds of social hierarchy can be rationally defended. As a hermeneutic tool for the elucidation of Sterne's fiction the idea that the possibility of rationalistic order prompts a sentimental repression of resentment is also extremely promising: compassion in Sterne's fiction comes with a clearly definable dimension related almost explicitly to social hierarchy in a manner consistent with Smith's characterisation of beneficence. What is more, the totemic figure of Poor Maria is, by a Rawlsian standard, almost dangerously over-determined: she is defined in terms of social status and economic vulnerability along with the pathos of a particular form of love melancholy and grief and, in gender terms, with an additional libidinal subtext. All of these incidents — and many more — are data that are highly significant in any analysis of the representation of affect, social hierarchy, virtue, and justice. They can be plausibly read as sentimental disavowals of unarticulated political possibilities: the proper care of old soldiers, the indigent, and the victims of a society that forbids marriage where an affective bond conflicts with parental power. They are also of considerable significance in any analysis of the status of various kinds of suffering from the point of view of metaphysical justifiability.

To put it another way: there is a partially repressed disavowal behind certain central figures in Sterne's fiction considered as objects of ethical concern that emerge from a Rawlsian perspective. A Rawlsian could find good reasons to support social mechanisms that would protect characters such as Trim, the son of Le Fever, and Poor Maria. At first sight, the ethics of compassion seems to produce significantly similar results to the Rawlsian calculus. A sentimentalist inclined to defend Sterne might argue that reason and sensibility can combine to produce the same results — except that

sensibility combines heartfelt concern with the mere prescriptions of duty. However, whilst there may be an overlap, the two approaches do not produce identical results, and the differences are highly significant. It may be that the objects of ethical concern constructed in Sterne's fiction which do not achieve strict, rationalistic approval are not framed as a rejection of that strict rationalism but as a sublation of them — for example, the stimulation of ethical concern that at least partially focuses on the dead ass (and allows it to compete for concern with the bereaved father) in *A Sentimental Journey*.⁸¹ There is a radical inconsistency between the ethical concern for the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' that cannot simply be accounted for as metaphors of the Christian concept of grace, but also suggest that these inconsistencies are constituted as partial repressions of the fear of strictly rational social order — how else could one justify the alms given to the voluntarily poor Franciscan? Furthermore, this same dynamic also helps add a dimension to a series of otherwise unresolvable paradoxes.

The fact that Yorick's significance is apotropaic lies at the heart of the theodictic implications of Sterne's fiction — the invocation and warding off of suffering and poverty, the identification with the poor and differentiation from them, the embodiment of a bourgeois need for reassurance, the implicit recognition of a metaphysic, socially defined and fundamentally irrational, and therefore not rigorously applicable to all — all speak in varying degrees of a partially repressed theodictic agenda and the sublation of the awareness of a purely rationalistic justification for social order. All of this serves to confirm Frank's assertion that, in novels like *A Sentimental Journey*, 'one might regard gentle consciousness as the melancholic underside of the bourgeois juggernaut'.⁸² This simply confirms the fact that the relationship of Sterne's fiction to theodictic discourse is

⁸¹ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 53-54.

⁸² Frank, p. 6.

significant, deeply ambiguous, and that, whilst indicating some of the hard questions, it fetishistically avoids the precise formulation of their logical conclusions and, in some measure, sublimates them.

Chapter 6: Pain and sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction

The relationship between Sterne's fiction and the cult of sentiment, however ambiguous, is too significant to be overlooked by any extended critical analysis.¹ If *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy* have a theodictic dimension worthy of note, it is hard to imagine that it would exist in isolation from the manifestation of sentimentalist ideology in the texts.² In fact, the theodictic and the sentimentalist aspects of Sterne's fiction are intimately connected. What is curious is the extent to which this has so far escaped any significant critical attention — an oddity that is confirmed by the title of an important, well established, and highly perceptive analysis of sentimentalism in eighteenth-century literature: Brissenden's *Virtue in Distress*. It is a good title for its subject matter because the importance of the figure of virtue in distress is, as Brissenden rightly asserts, a key legacy of the influence of sentimental literature.³ What is odd is that, despite its title, it does not

¹ The ambiguity is inevitably clouded by the way in which Sterne's contemporaries responded to him. For example, Brycchan Carey rightly asserts that for Ignatius Sancho (who solicited Sterne's support in the campaign against the slave trade) Sterne was an established hero of the project of representing 'Sentimental heroism' (Brycchan Carey, '“The Extraordinary Negro”: Ignatius Sancho, Joseph Jekyll, and the Problem of Biography', in *BjECS*, 26 (2003), 1-14 (p.6)).

² Cope gives an imaginative and counterintuitive overview of theodicy in eighteenth-century canonical literature: he argues that there is actually a tendency in the major authors to exaggerate evil in order 'to make life interesting'. However, his single, oblique reference to Sterne's fiction is strangely botched by what seems to be an unintended ambiguity: 'This artfully experimental exaggeration of evil can produce paradoxical effects, as evidenced by audience laughter at the preposterously exaggerated trivial misadventures of the hypersensitive Harley in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* or by any of Laurence Sterne's caricatures'. The association with sensibility in this reference is presumably significant, but apart from that, it is not clear what he means, for the simple reason that the 'paradoxical effects' created by 'Sterne's caricatures' seem to be intentional in a way that Mackenzie's are not (Kevin L. Cope, 'The Panorama of Theodicy, Or, Appealing Impressions of Evil in Assorted 18th-Century Descriptive Writers, with a View Towards Leibniz', in *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man: Literature and Theodicy*, ed. by Freiburg and Gruss, pp. 113-30 (p. 114)).

³ Brissenden argues that sentimentalism and Romanticism initiate a development in the European tradition that focuses on 'the theme of virtue in distress in the widest sense'

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make any significant links with the theodicy debate — after all, the same title could also serve for a book on theodicy. There is a good reason for this apparent oversight in the case of Sterne's fiction: not only does it have a deeply ambiguous relationship to the emerging cult of sensibility, it is filled with material that suggests that sentimentalism in fiction can operate as a fetish for dealing with inexplicable suffering.⁴ In other words, some of the most significant manifestations of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction may be defined by signs of a partially repressed allusion to a theodictic dimension — and the repression may account for the critical silence.

A fetish, as Žižek characterises it, is defined by the fact that it has a symbolic relation to the lie that it disguises.⁵ As far as sentimentalism is concerned, perhaps the single most important textual moment in Sterne's fiction that indicates this possibility is the famous apostrophe to 'sensibility' that comes close to the end of *A Sentimental Journey*.⁶ Whilst it speaks of the value of the sympathy which prompts 'generous joy', it also emphasises its role in keeping the sentimental 'martyr' in a state of prostration before leading him to some kind of transtemporal reward — although it is not entirely clear

³ Continued from previous page...

because it is the fruit of 'an awareness of the distance which separated moral idealism and the world of practical action'. Brissenden is aware of the theodictic implications of this, but he places them most firmly in the aftermath of the cult of sensibility and therefore does not expand on that implication. Interestingly, he puts a theodictic implication on emerging, post-Sentimentalist attitudes towards class distinctions at the persistence of poverty which 'seemed to contradict the assumption that man, like his Creator, is both benevolent and reasonable' (R.F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 77).

⁴ Mullan persuasively argues in reference to *Tristram Shandy* that the characters as subjectivities would be mad were they not rescued by their capacity for sympathy: if this is true, it is good evidence for the fetishistic nature of the representations of sentimental empathy (John Mullan, 'Laurence Sterne and the "Sociality" of the Novel', in *Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Marcus Walsh (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 33-45 (p. 48)).

⁵ *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 30.

⁶ Moglen's analysis points towards some of the key fetishistic ambiguities in the apostrophe to sensibility. She argues that Sterne is sceptical about the purity of empathic motives but nevertheless increasingly committed to a belief in its binding power. She argues that Sterne is demonstrating a belief that sympathy provides the ability to transcend oppressions by connection with the 'great Sensorium of the world' (Moglen, pp. 107-8).

whether the transtemporality is real or metaphorical. It also contains an allusion to the moment in *Tristram Shandy* where Eugenius, behaving as a model of sympathetic concern duly struggling to disguise his grief, visits Yorick on his deathbed.⁷ If this is an indication of ‘sensibility’ as a fetish, then its significance for the elucidation of Sterne’s fiction will be considerable:

Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that’s precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows! thou chainest thy martyr down upon his bed of straw — and ’tis thou who lifts him up to HEAVEN! — eternal fountain of our feelings! — ’tis here I trace thee — and this is thy divinity which stirs within me — not that, in some sad and sickening moments, ‘*my soul shrinks back upon herself, and startles at destruction*’ — mere pomp of words! — but that I feel some generous joys and generous cares beyond myself — all comes from thee, great — great SENSORIUM of the world! which vibrates, if a hair of our heads but falls upon the ground, in the remotest desert of thy creation. — Touch’d with thee, Eugenius draws my curtain when I languish — hears my tale of symptoms, and blames the weather for the disorder of his nerves. Thou giv’st a portion of it sometimes to the roughest peasant.⁸

This represents a concoction of allusions with significant ideological import. It includes a sentimentalised version of the Newtonian concept of gravity and the inter-relatedness of every single body in the universe along with a term which Newton also used to describe an attribute of God: a ‘boundless uniform Sensorium’.⁹ It seems to contain echoes of Smith’s foundationally sentimentalist assertion that even the ‘greatest ruffian’ is not altogether without ‘pity or compassion’.¹⁰ Above all, a version of the Christian idea of

⁷ *Tristram Shandy*, I, pp. 33-34.

⁸ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 155.

⁹ Sir Isaac Newton, *Opticks, Or A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections & Colours of Light*, 4th edn (New York: Dover Publications, 1979), p. 403. Oddly enough, Chandler fails to mention any link there might be between Sterne’s use of the term, ‘Sensorium’, and its famous appearance at the end of Newton’s *Opticks*. He places it (for perfectly understandable reasons) in relations to the Hartleian version of the term and also in the context of a seventeenth-century debate about materialism revolving around the writings of the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More (James Chandler, ‘The Languages of Sentiment’, *Textual Practice*, 22 (2008), 21-39 (p. 30)). Anne Janowitz, in her response to Chandler, corrects this omission with the additional emphasis on Addison’s role in popularising Newton’s terminology, without suggesting any kind of error on Chandler’s part (Anne Janowitz, ‘Response: Chandler’s “Vehicular Hypothesis” at Work’, *Textual Practice*, 22 (2008), 41-46 (p. 43)).

¹⁰ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 3.

God as an omnibenevolent being who takes note of every hair on the human head and notices the fall of every sparrow seems to be implicit in the apostrophe.¹¹ It confirms what Eagleton rightly asserts when he writes, 'For the eighteenth century, sympathy and sensibility hovered somewhere between the physical and the spiritual'.¹² However, that 'hovering' may also be an indicator of a fetish.

If this is a fetish, then the repressed lie behind the fascinated obsession with the experience of sympathy would be the sense that there is either no transcendental reality behind the apostrophised 'sensibility' or that it is not sentimentally benevolent.¹³ If this passage is representative of a vital ideological component in Sterne's fiction rather than a marginal detail in it, and if it can be plausibly read as a fetish, then this makes its sentimentalism nothing less than quintessentially theodictic: it would constitute the expression of an unresolved dilemma about the religious justification for inexplicable suffering. If this moment in the text is fetishistic it would be asserting the existence of God as an ideal version of the sentimental subject who sympathises with all suffering, including the most trivial, whilst repressing the awareness that such a God does not exist.

However, a proper analysis of the theodictic implications of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction cannot ignore its position within the ideological currents that are hidden under the surface of a wider ethical debate. There are good reasons to believe that at the heart of the sentimentalising of virtue in distress is a trauma that is inextricably bound up with a datum of equal significance in Sterne's fiction, sentimentalism, and theodicy: an ideological crisis within the cultural élite about the ethical status of self-interest and

¹¹ Matthew 10.29-31.

¹² Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 84.

¹³ Goring usefully observes that some early critics of Sterne's sermons objected to the immoral implications of his tendency to personify and apostrophise moral abstractions with the implication that this has a pagan, sub-Christian ring to it (Goring, p. 93).

the accompanying fear of solipsism. A hint of this is found in the allusion to the capacity of ‘sensibility’ to propel the subject in the direction of ‘generous joys and generous cares beyond myself’. At the heart of this is the contention that the sentimentalist aspects of Sterne’s fiction, unlike their Richardsonian predecessors, are notable for their highly explicit awareness of the significance of trauma in establishing claims to the ontological uniqueness of human identity.¹⁴ If this has interpretive validity, then it also suggests that it is a form of the Žižek-Lacanian concept of *the enjoyment of the symptom* — in this case, the need to leave fictional and sentimentalised representations of inexplicable suffering unresolved because it helps to establish the identity of the ideal, sympathising subject.¹⁵

To confirm the complexity of this issue, it is worth emphasising from the outset that the ideological shift surrounding the ethics of self-interest was not without its theological rationalisations. There were arguments from within the ecclesiastical élite which asserted that the ethics of self-interest could legitimately claim some kind of divine sanction. In the hands of some apologists of theism, this contention seems to be deployed as a kind of trump card to win a trick against the philosophy of sentiment —

¹⁴ Critics (like Moglen) who use psychoanalytic categories do not always emphasise the significance of trauma in this process. Moglen argues that empathy in *Tristram Shandy* is constructed as the constitutive element of a bond that makes each of the key males ‘project himself into the other in order to retrieve that other as a version of himself’ (Moglen, p. 89). This too is hinted at by the rejection in the apostrophe to sensibility of the idea (exemplified in a quotation from Addison’s *Cato*) that the soul should ‘[shrink] back upon herself, and [startle] at destruction’ — a quotation that comes as a prelude to the assertion of the existence of ‘the Divinity that stirs within us’. The quotation from *Cato* alludes to a passage that asserts the immortality of the soul and Yorick’s use of the phrase seems to be in keeping with Cato’s own attitude. It comes at the beginning of Act V as the republican hero, Cato, contemplates suicide with a copy of ‘Plato’s book on the immortality of the Soul’ in his hand. Cato argues,

‘whence this secret dread, and inward horror,
Of falling into nought? why shrinks the Soul
Back on her self, and startles at destruction?
’Tis the Divinity that stirs within us,
’Tis Heaven it self, that points out an hereafter,
And intimates eternity to Man.’

([Joseph] Addison, *Cato, A Tragedy* (London: Printed for the Company, 1730), pp. 69-70.)

¹⁵ Fink, p. 3. Also see Chapter 5 above, p. 137.

self-interest is used to explain compassion. An important specimen of this tendency is to be found in the writings of the heterodox Irish Anglican bishop, Thomas Clayton:

The Child that is pleased with hearing its own Praise, does not consider that this Passion was implanted in him to excite him afterwards to such Actions as are truly Praise-worthy. Nor does the Child, that smiles, and is delighted with the cheerful Countenance of its Nurse, or who on the contrary is affected with Grief when she is dejected and seems to weep, consider, that this sympathetic Sense of Pleasure and Pain was given to make it rejoice, when it is further grown up in Years, at the Happiness of others, and to commiserate their distress. And yet this is the Origin of *Compassion*, and was the Use designed by the Creator for these Sensations, and is generally the natural Effect of them.¹⁶

This extract seems to be designed to resonate with the awareness that its early readers would have had of the injunction in the New Testament to ‘rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep’ — an injunction with an equally interesting resonance for the philosophy of sentiment.¹⁷ It also gives its appeal to the status of compassion as a key datum in its argument despite giving it an aetiological twist by constructing it as a primordial form of affect which is simultaneously an expression of naïve narcissism.

However, the assumption that theistic ethics is rooted in self-interest is also found in the writings of the more orthodox Warburton (whose connection with Sterne’s writing is far more direct). The only difference is that Warburton’s writing constructs self-love as the necessary prequel to higher ethical bonds which can be discarded by a process of refinement:

It is true, indeed, that Benevolence, arising from [self-love], at first runs thick and turbid; but as it holds its way, it refines; it purifies and expands its current, till it hath lost all memory of its low original.¹⁸

¹⁶ Robert Clayton, *Some Thoughts on Self-Love, Innate-Ideas, Free-Will, Taste, Sentiment, Liberty and Necessity*, &c (Dublin: George Faulkner, 1753), p. 12.

¹⁷ Romans 12.15

¹⁸ William Warburton, *The Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion Occasionally Opened and Explained*, 2 vols (London: P. Knapton, 1753; and London: J. and P. Knapton, 1754), p. 77.

By contrast to Warburton's assertion that benevolence can eventually purge itself of its ethically defective origins, the posture of *Tristram Shandy* is to moralise about 'interest' (i.e. self-interest) as something that can probably never shake off its ethical ambiguities. When Dr. Slop recognises that he has benefited from the pains and complexities of Mrs. Shandy's labour, Tristram informs us that:

the thought floated only in Dr. Slop's mind, without sail or ballast to it, as a simple proposition; millions of which, as your worship knows, are every day swimming quietly in the middle of the thin juice of a man's understanding, without being carried backwards or forwards, till some little gusts of passion or interest drive them to one side.¹⁹

The significance of this as part of a sectarian polemic (Slop is a Roman Catholic) must not disguise the fact that the text is also constructing Slop as a manifestation of a sentimentally defective mindset: his response to the intense labour pains of his patient is not one of spontaneous sympathy such as Toby might have felt, it is instead tinged with the implication that it is polluted by a self-interested preoccupation with his professional reputation and power. The significance of 'passion and [self-]interest' in any evaluation of sentimentalist avoidance of the truth of desire rather than a repression of the inadequacy of the justification of trauma is more complicated.

To make these characteristics of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction more visible, three aspects of their manifestations in the text need to be examined: the ethical, the affective, and the semantic/lexical pointers to the fetishistic sublimation of apparently pointless suffering. Once Sterne's fiction is put into these contexts, the significance of the theodicy debate in its sentimental mode will begin to emerge.

Suffering, sentiment, and the ethics of self-interest

When uncle Toby characterises 'compassion' as a 'security for the rest [of the virtues]' he gives the imaginative involvement in the unmerited pain of others a decisive role in

¹⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 197.

ethical thinking.²⁰ The implication of the quotation is that unmerited suffering (or suffering that is inextricably wedded to meritorious acts) is the most worthy of compassion.²¹ This would seem to express the sentimentalist ethical position in a nutshell. However, that position is far from straightforward or undifferentiated: it not only encompasses a spectrum of ideological positions, it also shows nuances that depend on the medium in which it is expressed. Whilst there is a considerable overlap, sentimentalism as it is found in fiction is not identical to its expression in philosophical/ethical discourse.

For the purposes of this argument, it will be necessary to distinguish *literary sentimentalism* from *the philosophy of sentiment*. Literary sentimentalism privileges and canonises the ethical value of empathy and its indicators are often terms like ‘humanity’, ‘sensibility’, ‘pity’, ‘delicacy’, ‘compassion’, ‘feeling’, and in the early stages of the development of the ideology sometimes, but by no means always, ‘sentiment’. It is worth noting that there is a marked difference in the volume of ‘sentimental’ incidents related to virtue in distress in *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*. In *Tristram Shandy*, the overwhelming majority of pathetic incidents, or representations of empathy, have some relationship, however ironic or parodic, to physical or emotional suffering — for example, Elizabeth’s traumatic labour, the death of Le Fever, the imprisonment of Trim’s brother by the Inquisition, Toby and Trim’s war wounds, Walter’s frustrated plans, and Tristram’s groin injuries and injured nose. In *A Sentimental Journey*, there is a higher preponderance of descriptions of libidinally driven empathy than representations

²⁰ Ibid., II, p. 801.

²¹ It is the kind of datum that confirms the view of critics like Leslie who put Sterne in the sentimentalist mainstream. He argues that ‘Sterne championed’ the ‘moral stance’ that the ‘judgement of characters’ “ability to feel” implies a moral value behind sentimentalism that demands empathy and compassion for suffering’ (John C. Leslie, ‘Music’s Sentimental Role in *Tristram Shandy*’, *Papers on Language & Literature*, 41 (2005), 55-66 (p. 56)).

of reactions to suffering: Yorick does not only exercise compassion towards grief, there are also numerous incidents in which sentimental encounters with attractive women also exercise his capacity for empathy.²² However, the encounters centred on responses to suffering in *A Sentimental Journey* are far from marginal and play a highly significant role in the rhetorical construction of the fiction.

In an apparent contrast to literary sentimentalism, *the philosophy of sentiment* in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith uses the fact of sympathy as a datum in the construction of an argument in favour of an autonomous basis for ethics, i.e. an ethics that does not have to appeal to divine authority.²³ As has already been shown in Warburton and Wollaston, one of the anxieties that this aroused was focused on the question of the effectiveness of a moral code without divine sanction to maintain social order.²⁴ For spokesmen of the official ideology, a significant feature of that threat was the danger of individuals being allowed to give unrestrained scope to self-interest unchecked by the threat of a transcendently guaranteed limit to the claims of the individual. This is ripe for a Žižekian reading with its concepts of the mechanisms whereby *jouissance* is controlled in order to mitigate the threats of chaotic and potentially lethal self-indulgence.²⁵ However, this anxiety is radicalised and displaced in a sentimental ideology haunted by its own repressed lie: the possibility that it represented nothing less than a disguised form of egoism.

²² For example, 'The Remise Door', pp. 22-23; 'The Pulse', pp. 69-71, 'The Temptation', pp. 121-23.

²³ Hume famously asserted that, 'Morality [...] is more properly felt than judg'd of' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, III, p. 26). For an explanation of the importance of sympathy in Smith, see Chapter 5 above, pp. 141-42.

²⁴ See Chapter 5 above, pp. 122-23.

²⁵ An example of this is found in Žižek's compelling description of racism in terms of the 'imput[ation] to the "other" [of] an excessive enjoyment [i.e. *jouissance*]: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment' (*Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 203).

The imputation that the philosophy of sentiment covertly depends upon the primacy of self-interest was a significant feature in the debates that surrounded its elaboration. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* deals with this question explicitly — it even asserts that it has made ‘much noise in the world’:

Sympathy [...] cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle. When I sympathize with your sorrow or your indignation, it may be pretended, indeed, that my emotion is founded in self-love, because it arises from [...] putting myself in your situation, and thence conceiving what I should feel in like circumstances. [Yet] this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I [...] should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die; but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you; and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not the least upon my own. [...] That whole account of human nature [...] which deduces all sentiments and affections from self-love, which has made so much noise in the world [...] seems to me to have arisen from some confused misapprehension of the system of sympathy.²⁶

There is little doubt that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* needs to construct its defence of sentimental ethics against the imputation of egoism and such defences (from a Žižekian perspective) also exude the suggestion of a repressed disavowal.

However, some of the differences between the philosophy of sentiment and literary sentimentalism are highlighted by this passage: such utterances raise the metafictional question so important to formalist approaches to Sterne’s fiction when it is applied to the activity of composing sentimental encounters which requires the author to ‘consider what [he] should suffer if he was really’ a specifically fictional character.²⁷ The idea of an author trying to identify with a literary construct conceived as part of an

²⁶ *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 465-66. Hume’s view does not accord with Smith’s: he emphasises the extent to which sympathy can overlook the actual state of mind of the unfortunate (see Chapter 5 above, p. 135, n. 3).

²⁷ It is also a significant feature of more phenomenological approaches: Iser deals very specifically with what he calls the process of *transposition* — the morally significant ‘doubling of the self’ by an act of imaginative projection. He also makes a commendably significant link with *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Laurence Sterne: *Tristram Shandy*, pp. 117-18). However, the significant implication this has for the question of egoism does not feature in his analysis.

attempt to glean both income and literary celebrity as a demonstration of an altruistic impulse seems to contain a contradiction.²⁸ This tension is not limited to the philosophy of sentiment: it manifests itself in Sterne's fiction most intensely in the encounter between Yorick and Maria in *A Sentimental Journey* (at the culmination of which is the apostrophe to sensibility).²⁹ The significance of this encounter is not solely indicated by the considerable role that it was to play in the popularisation of the fiction after Sterne's death — attested to by the widespread reproduction of images of Poor Maria.³⁰ It also constitutes the one major intertextual link between *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*: this is the one incident from the earlier fiction that is revisited in detail.

The first indication of its engagement with the subtext about egoism is indicated by the fact that, in plain view, it is edited in such a way as to rescript the libidinal undertones of Tristram's encounter with Maria.³¹ The goat (a symbol of lust) is replaced with a dog (a symbol of fidelity) and Maria's suffering is shifted to the death of her father and away from the more libidinally charged consequences of the forbidden banns which prevent her marriage:

I look'd in Maria's eyes, and saw she was thinking more of her father
than of her lover or her little goat; for as she utter'd [the words to her pet

²⁸ Some mention needs to be made of Shklovsky's seminal work at this point: he famously argues that the representation of pain and the role of compassion are key indicators of the fact that there is no necessary connection between life and its representation in literature. He argues that the writer must write without compassion and have a sense of the mechanical operation of the representation of pain if he is to elicit compassion. He gives Walter's reaction to the death of Bobby as an archetypal example of the disjunction between real pain and its literary representation, and thus of the relationship between real life and literature ('A Parodying Novel', pp. 79–80).

²⁹ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 149–55.

³⁰ As Mary-Céline Newbould rightly remarks, 'Maria is one of the literary figures embodying the sentimental most frequently depicted in the visual arts' (Mary-Céline Newbould, 'Character or Caricature? Depicting sentimentalism and Richard Newton's Illustrations of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*', *Word & Image*, 25 (2009), 115–128 (p. 117)). The possibility that the main features of the construct of Maria predates Sterne's fiction perhaps adds something to the impetus behind its success: it is hitting a significant ideological archetype. Benedict is right to argue that Maria is not simply Sterne's invention (Benedict, p. 497).

³¹ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 783–84.

dog, “Thou shalt not leave me, Sylvio”] the tears trickled down her cheeks.

I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe them away as they fell with my handkerchief. — I then steep’d it in my own — and then in hers — and then in mine — and then I wip’d hers again — and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter or motion.

I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pester’d the world ever convince me of the contrary.³²

The full significance of the egoistic undertone cannot be appreciated without reference to its Quixotic dimension — indeed, its rhetorical kernel lies in the invocation of Quixote:³³

[My following an irresistible impulse to go out of my way to see Maria is] going, I own, like the Knight of the Woeful Countenance, in quest of melancholy adventures — but I know not how it is, but I am never so perfectly conscious of the existence of a soul within me, as when I am entangled in them.³⁴

The effect of the allusion is to construct Yorick’s sentimental fascination with Maria as excessive, insanely altruistic which, in turn, constitutes for Yorick an irrefutable disproof of materialism and a ground for a non-specific but nevertheless theistic basis for ethics.³⁵ After all, appeals to the concept of the soul in this form have a specifically religious undertone.³⁶

³² *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 151.

³³ Lovesey persuasively argues that many literary and philosophical invocations of Quixote in Sterne’s milieu (from Shaftesbury to Smollett) started to include the view that ‘saint errantry’ makes ‘enthusiasm a vocation, but these texts view the religious quest and the passion fuelling it as pathological, narcissistic, dangerously un-English, and, increasingly through the century, ridiculous’. The reference to narcissism connects this with the debate about the ethics of self-interest, among other things. However, it seems to be the case, as one might expect, that the construction of the Quixotic mindset in Sterne’s fiction is highly ambiguous (Oliver Lovesey, ‘Divine Enthusiasm and Love Melancholy: *Tristram Shandy* and Eighteenth-Century Narratives of Saint Errantry’, *ECentF*, 16(2004), 373-99 (p. 375)).

³⁴ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 149.

³⁵ The status of this episode as a refutation of materialism is contested amongst the critics. For Battestin, *A Sentimental Journey* represents Sterne’s final capitulation to a sentimental materialist position, a ‘faith that is scarcely distinguishable from the naturalism of the *philosophes*’ — a shift which, for Battestin, owes much of its character to Sterne’s encounter with Parisian materialists (‘The Critique of Freethinking from Swift to Sterne’, p. 416).

³⁶ It is possible that this represents a rescription of a significant theme about corporeal identity that it trailed in *Tristram Shandy*. Parker argues that consciousness rooted in the body is represented in *Tristram Shandy* as fundamentally incapable of apprehending certain realities about bodily existence (Parker, p. 217).

Yet, in a paradoxical twist that points precisely to its character as a fetish, the aura of melancholic enjoyment with its suggestion of a profoundly self-interested impulse that drives Yorick to see Maria appears to be offered at the same time as an all-but-explicit attempt to refute the ethics of self-interest. No solution to Maria's difficulties is considered, Yorick merely luxuriates in the spectacle of her grief. In the leave-taking, there is a curiously contradictory account with a libidinal and incestuous flavour in a reference to Maria's 'fine [feminine] form': the assertion that 'so much was there about her of all that the heart wishes, or the eye looks for in a woman' is intermixed with a familiar feature of Sterne's fiction — a not entirely convincing act of distancing from the libidinal subtext in which Yorick fantasises that, if necessity should demand it, Maria 'should lay in my bosom, and be unto me as a daughter'.³⁷ As far as the theodictic import of the incident is concerned, the indulgence of grief supersedes any questions about its metaphysical justifiability — there is no attempt at the 'systematic reasonings' that Yorick engages in as part of the response to the idea of imprisonment.³⁸

This is not the error of demanding something from a text that is not there: the point of the incident is the luxuriant sympathy with Maria's grief with only a tangential reference to its cause and one does not have to be specially concerned with theodictic subtexts to see that this raises questions. Even in its more common, non-technical sense of the word, Yorick's interest in the 'melancholy adventure' of seeing Maria, could be described as palpably fetishistic. It is not difficult to interpret this incident as a disavowal of the ideological lie that underpins Yorick's supposed commitment to theistic notions of providence and the fact of inexplicable suffering. What is more, the construction of

³⁷ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 154. Eagleton plausibly suggests that, 'Yorick in *A Sentimental Journey* seems comically unaware of the unconscious eroticism of his own motives' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 88). This does not mean that the text is framed to make the reader equally unaware.

³⁸ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 96.

Quixote's obsession with heroic literature to the extent that he is able to reshape those experiences which cannot be integrated into his pre-delusional, symbolic grasp of experience (what Lacanians call the *Real*) must be the literary embodiment of a culmination of a process of fetishism *par excellence*.³⁹ The consequence of this is fairly straightforward: the knowing invocation of Quixote underpinning the Poor Maria incident seems to suggest that something significant is being repressed. Despite this the Maria incident has yet more to yield in the debate about theodicy.

The fact of Yorick's empathic engagement with Maria's distress is constructed as empirical evidence for the existence of a soul. It does this by festooning the trauma with the benevolent concern that it inspires as Yorick appears to mimic the compassionate and selfless concern of the God of sentimentalism whose goodness would otherwise be called into question by the fact of Maria's suffering. The construction of an incident in which compassion is meant to point towards a non-material explanation of human identity and moral concern palpably demonstrates its relationship to the debate about the ethics of self-interest which, in turn, creates an unbreakable relationship of implication between literary sentimentalism and the philosophy of sentiment. This process needs to be illuminated by reference to some of the literary antecedents.

The debate about the ethical status of self-interest had been partly prefigured in the response to Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* that had begun four decades earlier and it also manifests itself in the medium of literary sentimentalism.⁴⁰ It could be argued, using Žižek's terminology, that literary sentimentalist rejections of Mandeville (such as

³⁹ The expert on Lacan, Bruce Fink, defines the 'real' as 'what has not yet been put into words or formulated [and which can] be thought of [...] as the connection or link between two thoughts that has succumbed to repression and must be restored' (Fink, p. 49).

⁴⁰ The evidence for this is found in the widely noted allusion to *The Fable of the Bees* in *Clarissa* where Mandeville is damned by association in Lovelace's allusion to 'my worthy friend Mandeville [and his] rule, *That private vices are public benefits*' (*Clarissa*, p. 847).

Richardson's) were too explicit to be fetishistic — an hysterical denial of the exposure of a lie concealed within an ideology concerning the relationship between libidinal forces and their sublimation. However, by viewing the encounter between Yorick and Maria in the light of the repudiation of the ethics of self-interest, it could be argued that the barely sublimated eroticism of the encounter represents a relatively unfettered acknowledgement of the libidinal economy that shapes the apparently altruistic impulse — and that very acknowledgement of the partially repressed disavowal makes the incident thoroughly fetishistic. In this interpretation, *A Sentimental Journey* constructs the encounter between Yorick and Maria as a conjunction between *eros* and altruism with the apparent aim of disproving the ethics of self-interest and establishing a theistic basis for ethical obligations, but it does so at the price of repressing questions about the state of affairs that renders characters like Maria as objects of sentimental sympathy.

To realise the depth of the ambiguity of Yorick's encounter with Maria one need only compare it with a key text in the development of literary sentimentalism such as Grandison's rescue of Harriet Byron from the sexual predations of Sir Hargrave Pollexfen which is as clear an example of sentimental altruism as one could hope to find.⁴¹ By comparison, Yorick's encounter with Maria is constructed in such a way that it is impossible for the event to shed itself entirely of that libidinal interest which formally invalidates the altruism canonised by Smith's version of the philosophy of sentiment. What is more, for this effect to work it depends on an awareness of the fact that it is all grounded in an implied, idealised empathic response to suffering. It is the apparently deliberate failure of this episode to shed completely all signals of reference to the antecedents to Maria's trauma that makes it implicitly theodictic. Its semi-realised

⁴¹ Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, 7 vols (London: Heinemann, 1902), 1, pp. 162-63.

disavowal of both the ground of the ethics of self-interest and the myth of sentimental altruism centred on the representation of unjustifiable suffering seems, in every regard, to qualify it as a fetish with substantial theodictic import.

What is more, the process of disavowal that is so central to fetishes is facilitated by ideological justifications that are very specific to sentimentalism. The foundational manoeuvre of the process centres around literary sentimentalism's inevitable preoccupation with sensation. In the evolution of empiricism, it presents itself as the result of the Lockean epistemological rejection of the existence of innate ideas and its replacement with the belief in the priority of experience and sensation.⁴² As this folds into literary sentimentalism, it eventually becomes the basis of a new preoccupation with 'feeling' (as both sensation and empathy) as the basis of all certainty. Literary sentimentalism (as distinct from the philosophy of sentiment) ostensibly represents an enormous promotion of the authority of intuition and preter-rational sensation in the interpretation of experience — an authority that can no longer be trumped by the *a priori* prescriptions that had been the customary solution to the human experience of inexplicable calamity. The end product of this process allows literary sentiment to validate for subjects the choice to refuse an explanation of the significance of experience that does not accord with the subject's emotional or intuitive responses. It allows the subject to say something to the effect that, 'Even if I accept the rationality of what you say, if I do not *feel* its truth, its claim to be true will always be suspect to me — including

⁴² Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1, p. 13. Porter's compelling and lucid account of the ideological context of Sterne's fiction is well worth noting here: he usefully suggests (and with good reason) that the persona of Tristram may well be a demonstration of the futility of Lockean epistemology and doubting 'the very wisdom of probing the mechanisms of the mind' (*Flesh in the Age of Reason*, p. 298).

any explanations, however rational, which you may offer for the metaphysical significance of suffering'.⁴³

Sentiment, trauma, and appeals to religious authority

It might be argued that the repudiation of a priori explanations of suffering in favour of the intuitive and affective responses it evokes represents a moment of emotional liberation. It could be seen as a release from some of those rationalistic or customary norms and prohibitions into which the subject is thrown at birth and of which the subject's life inevitably becomes a nonvoluntary expression.⁴⁴ At the very least, by privileging empathy and offering the possibility of an emotionally luxuriant response to suffering, sentimentalism seems to offer the subject an illusion of control over the meaning ascribed to trauma. However, this liberation is exposed as an illusion by the fact that, inevitably, sentimentalism reveals itself as a force every bit as hegemonic as the ideology it displaces. Despite this, a word of caution needs to be introduced: in itself, the fact that the experience of trauma is likely to play a central role in almost all ideological formations is not entirely surprising. For example, suffering in orthodox, pre-modern Christian understandings, was often seen as an important aspect of the ontologically central belief in human fallenness and Original Sin. Žižek identifies the characteristics of the universal importance of trauma in human ontology when he writes:

one should be attentive to the formulation which repeatedly occurs in most of the reactions to the identification of the genome: 'The old adage that every disease with the exception of trauma has a genetic component

⁴³ Lupton's hypothesis that the writings of Sterne and Hume are co-symptomatic of the same *crisis of authenticity* is another way of approaching this phenomenon. However, the Heideggerian dimension to her hypothesis is effectively encompassed by the application of Žižek's theory to Sterne's fiction (*Tristram Shandy*, David Hume and Epistemological Fiction', pp. 102-3).

⁴⁴ Sim's account of sentimentalism is useful here — although his analysis is focused more on those aspects of Sterne's fiction that can be read as anticipations of postmodern epistemologies. He argues that *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates the chaological impossibility of forming a fixed personal identity and that 'Sentiment represents an emotional response to a world beyond our control' ('Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory and Criticism', p. 100).

is really going to be true.' [...] Of course, animals can also experience traumatic ruptures: is the ants' universe not thrown off the rails when a human intervention totally subverts their environs? However, the difference between animals and men is crucial here: for animals, such traumatic ruptures are the exception, they are experienced as a catastrophe which ruins their way of life; for humans, on the contrary, the traumatic encounter is a universal condition, the intrusion which sets in motion the process of 'becoming human'. [...] This is the lesson of both psychoanalysis and the Judeo-Christian tradition: the specific human vocation does not rely on the development of man's inherent potentials [...] it is triggered by an external traumatic encounter of the Other's desire in its impenetrability.⁴⁵

The distinctive twist which literary sentimentalism gives to this is its apparent need to shift away from *a priori* justifications of evil (such as the appeal to the concept of Original Sin) and its concomitant prescription of the virtue of resignation. This shift leads to an ideological reformulation in which justifications for suffering actually become an obstacle. As an aspect of sentimentalism, its significance for the elucidation of Sterne's fiction comes from the fact that, if Žižek is right, trauma is every bit as important in the construction of literary sentimentalism as the control that the same ideology sets out to exert over the libidinal economy.

Another way of putting this might be to say that, from the theistic point of view, the philosophy of sentiment offers, at best, the possibility of a religious guarantee for ethics in which the empirically observable phenomenon of compassion can be reconstructed as a divinely implanted affect designed as a device to limit and transmute the pursuit of self-interest. At worst, the existence of compassion, even as an expression of self-interest, in the hands of the sceptic can be used as a ground for creating an ethical framework autonomous of religious reference with all of the dangers anticipated by the theist. However, even the dangers of this possibility are taken into consideration by theists like Warburton and Clayton (despite the heterodox tendencies of the latter)

⁴⁵ *On Belief*, pp. 46-47

whose work clearly shows the ease with which the prevailing ideology was capable of appropriating the ethics of self-interest.

That this has significant relevance to the fiction of Sterne can be attested to by the fact that the much neglected ‘Abuses of Conscience’ sermon in *Tristram Shandy* is directed specifically to an aspect of this debate: it challenges the capacity of the subject to make autonomous ethical judgements on the basis of something akin to intuition or affect. It postulates a specifically theonomous ethic in which the religiously observant subject is constructed as significantly dependent upon revelation which, in turn, is assumed to harmonise with ‘calm reason and the unchangeable obligations of justice and truth’:

if you would form a just judgment of what is of infinite importance to you not to be misled in, — namely, in what degree of real merit you stand either as an honest man, an useful citizen, a faithful subject to your king, or a good servant to your God, — call in religion and morality. — Look, What is written in the law of God? — How readest thou? — Consult calm reason and the unchangeable obligations of justice and truth; — what say they?

Let Conscience determine the matter upon these reports; — and then if thy heart condemns thee not, which is the case the apostle supposes, — the rule will be infallible; — [...] thou wilt have confidence towards God; — that is, have just grounds to believe the judgment thou hast past upon thyself, is the judgment of God; — and nothing else but an anticipation of that righteous sentence which will be pronounced upon thee hereafter by that Being, to whom thou art finally to give an account of thy actions.⁴⁶

Whether or not ‘The Abuses of Conscience’ constitutes little more than the hired expression of an ideology to which Sterne personally gives, at best, no more than notional assent is a moot point.⁴⁷ What is not moot is the fact that the sermon is

⁴⁶ *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 154.

⁴⁷ The sentimental ambiguity of ‘The Abuses of Conscience’ has a venerable place in critical debates about Sterne’s fiction. Even if he failed irrefutably to prove his contention, Rufus Putney coherently argued over 50 years ago that ‘The Abuses of Conscience’ is conclusive proof that Sterne was emphatically not a sentimentalist and that it is a demonstration confirmed in words that Sterne himself wrote towards the end of his life that his ‘heart not [his] head betray’d’ him into his ‘follies’ (Rufus D.S. Putney, ‘Laurence Sterne, Apostle of Laughter’, in *Eighteenth-Century English Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by James L. Clifford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 274-84 (p. 275)).

interjected into a text otherwise preoccupied with Walter's idiosyncratic (and thus implicitly autonomous) pursuit of moral norms. The emphasis is intensified by the fact that Walter is in turn partly defined in opposition to the theologically and sentimentally orthodox Toby's whistling of 'Lillabullero' at Walter's excesses.

Toby also shows every sign of being thoroughly theonomous in moral matters — he habitually roots his ethical justifications in religious authorities such as the Anglican norm of *The Book of Common Prayer*:

The cares and disquietudes of the marriage state, quoth Mrs. Wadman, are very great. I suppose so — said my uncle Toby: and therefore when a person, continued Mrs. Wadman, is so much at his ease as you are — so happy, captain Shandy, in yourself, your friends and your amusements — I wonder what reasons can incline you to the state —
— They are written, quoth my uncle Toby, in the Common-Prayer Book.⁴⁸

At the very least, *Tristram Shandy* represents unequivocally a contest between the opposing claims of autonomous and theonomous ethics and that the heart of the battle between these two approaches is located in questions about the status of intuition, affect, sentiment, and self-interest as sources of moral authority.

However, the inter-relatedness and relevance of these issues does not disguise the crucial fact that *Tristram Shandy* unreservedly displays their provisional status. It leaves a hermeneutic blank at its heart, it signals a lack in the place where the reader is normally taught to expect a unifying, hegemonic framework for the explanation of events. The construction of the intuitive, 'natural', sentimentalist, altruistic empathy of Toby — with the allied assumption that his sentimental intuitions cohere with the demands of religious authorities such as *The Book of Common Prayer* — is rudely juxtaposed with the heteronomous dismissal of intuition posited by 'The Abuses of Conscience' and the libidinally driven interest of Widow Wadman that masks itself as sentimental altruism.

⁴⁸ *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 787.

Walter's repression of libidinal desire appears to spend itself in passionate but fruitless sublimation and his unabashed pursuit of his self-interest blinds him to the sufferings and dangers that his wife's labour represents. Like the other unresolved tensions between sentimental, religious, and self-interested ethical cruces, it dances around two key ideological and partially repressed disavowals. The first is the disavowal of libidinal forces in the construction of moral norms. The second is the construction of an empathy that is largely dumb about the metaphysical justification of trauma. The reason that the second is fetishistic whilst the first is not is simple: the first is insufficiently sublimated, placed too close to the surface of the text to be a repressed disavowal.

It may be that libidinal issues are far closer to the surface of the texts than the ideological tensions between the ethics of self-interest and sentimentalism. What is less clear is their theodictic implications in Sterne's fiction in the context of sentimentalist ideology. If anything in this respect is clear, it is the extent to which *A Sentimental Journey* constructs *eros* as a moral force — no less than the basis of *agape*/charity/goodwill — in a way that leaves open its possible use as an argument for theonomous ethics. It is as if *A Sentimental Journey* gives expression to an epistemology that has been repositioned relative to *Tristram Shandy*. If Toby is a representative of a heteronomous ethical position expressed in the nascent norms of literary sentimentalism, the Yorick of *A Sentimental Journey* seems to represent a refinement of a position already hinted at in the persona of Tristram — he is constructed as somebody for whom affect and libido rather than reason plays a decisive part in ethical formation:

— The young fellow, said the landlord, is beloved by all the town, and there is scarce a corner in Montreuil where the want of him will not be felt: he has but one misfortune in the world, continued he, 'he is always in love.' — I am heartily glad of it, said I, — 'twill save me the trouble every night of putting my breeches under my head. In saying this, I was making not so much La Fleur's eulogy as my own, having been in love with one princess or another almost all my life, and I hope I shall go on so till I die, being firmly persuaded, that if ever I do a mean action, it must be in

some interval betwixt one passion and another: whilst this interregnum lasts, I always perceive my heart locked up, — I can scarce find in it to give Misery a sixpence; and therefore I always get out of it as fast as I can — and the moment I am rekindled, I am all generosity and good-will again; and would do anything in the world, either for or with any one, if they will but satisfy me there is no sin in it.

— But in saying this, — sure I am commending the passion, — not myself.⁴⁹

It could be asserted that this is no more than a variation on a theme in Western ethics that dates back all the way to *The Symposium* and, in doing so, it could be argued that *A Sentimental Journey* is interestingly distinguishing itself from the ethics of compassion by shifting to an ethics grounded in *eros*.⁵⁰ And yet, despite its potentially ironic significance, there seems to be an indisputable possibility that it is also unequivocally an expression of both literary sentimentalism and a variation on the theme of the philosophy of sentiment. If this is the case then it is also inextricably linked to a debate which is festooned with theodictic significance: if there is no guaranteed, *a priori* metaphysical justification for ethical action as implied by a widespread theistic view of the meaning of suffering, then it must be sought for *a posteriori* in common human affect. This is reinforced by the fact that Guthrie and others constantly emphasise the near universality of the affect upon which literary sentimentalism depends. The text of crucial significance in this process as it relates to the formation of Sterne's fiction is *Ephraim Tristram Bates* which is widely acknowledged as a source for *Tristram Shandy* and whose significance tends to be dismissed or overlooked in the critical debate.

⁴⁹ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 44.

⁵⁰ *The Symposium* (which can also be translated as 'The Banquet') is grounded on a decision of a group of Athenians to entertain themselves with speeches in honour of love/eros (Plato, *The Banquet: A Dialogue of Plato Concerning Love*, trans. by Floyer Sydenham, 2 vols (London: H. Woodfall, W. Sandby, and R. and J. Dodsley, 1761; London: W. Sandby, 1767), 1, p. 48).

***Ephraim Tristram Bates* and the sentimental repression of theodicy**

Ephraim Tristram Bates is the confused bearer of the narrative construction of a highly ironic account of virtue in distress. Its religiously transgressive elements are also explicitly co-symptomatic of contemporaneous controversies about the ethical status of self-interest. When *Ephraim Tristram Bates* picks up that debate, it is evidently doing so in a manner wholly co-symptomatic of the conditions that give rise to the same question in Warburton and Clayton. In addition, the difference between *Ephraim Tristram Bates* and *Tristram Shandy* in its use of Bates' blasphemous re-baptism in the serving maid's urine — with all of the consequence that a Shandean hypothesis would give to the naming process — clearly and ironically asserts ethical autonomy.⁵¹ *Ephraim Tristram Bates* constructs Bates as both rigorously honourable but equally clear that honour and ethical responsibility are unequivocally rooted in self-interest:

Self-love, says [Bates], I have often read, and firmly believe and feel it now, is the Spring of all our Actions. In serving the Regiment I shall serve myself.⁵²

However, this is somewhat incoherently intermingled with a construction of sentimental benevolence whose theodictic implications are worn on the sleeve but which, in what feels like its reformulation in *A Sentimental Journey* in the incident between Yorick and the Franciscan, makes its relevance to theodicy of central importance.

In *Ephraim Tristram Bates*, Bates is represented as the victim of a confidence trick played by a Manxman who mischievously engages Bates' sympathy in order to get

⁵¹ *The Life and Memoirs of Mr. Ephraim Tristram Bates Commonly Called Corporal Bates, A Broken-hearted Soldier* (London: W. Owen, 1756), pp. 11-12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

money out of him. When it is revealed to Bates that his sympathy was elicited by deceit, he says the following:

Bates was sorry for the Imposition, because, says he, ‘I past many a Man, I fear, afterwards, (between the Hours of 3 and 5 sitting on Benches in the Park) who perhaps might really want, and yet the Recollection of this *Mank’s* Man put a Stop to all others; thus says he, it often happens; the Good are punish’d for the Bad; the Deserver for the Undeserver; I wish I had never seen the lying Fellow.’⁵³

Exactly the same debate about the worthiness of the poor is repeated at the beginning of *A Sentimental Journey* in the incident with the Franciscan begging for alms.⁵⁴ At one level, it seems that the incident in Sterne’s fiction recasts the scenario from *Ephraim Tristram Bates* as nothing more than a sectarian attack on Catholic monasticism. But, if there is an intertextual relationship between the Manxman in *Ephraim Tristram Bates* and the Friar in *A Sentimental Journey*, it is important to note what has been repressed in the latter, namely the awareness that ‘the Good are punish’d for the Bad; the Deserver for the Undeserver’ — an awareness that is not normally allowed to prevail in many canonical fictions of this period and which *A Sentimental Journey* seems to sublimate in a very particular way.

At one level, this can all be resolved by arguing that *A Sentimental Journey* coheres with the theodicy of ‘The Ways of Providence Justified’ in that it could be read as a demonstration of the fundamentally monist approach to evil that asserts the meaninglessness of deciphering the difference between good and evil. Following this line, Yorick must be understood, in his finally relenting in making the gift to the Friar of the silver snuffbox, as abandoning the attempt to decipher the unfathomable ethical status of the situation and surrendering instead to his sentimentalist awareness of

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 172-73.

⁵⁴ *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 7-11.

sympathetic failure in first refusing alms. But this does not sufficiently account for the contrast between the two incidents.

Ephraim Tristram Bates leaves the theodictic implication fairly close to the surface and wholly unresolved. By contrast, *A Sentimental Journey* repositions the ethical question into a context of sectarian difference and abandons any logical resolution in favour of a sentimental compromise. The considerations of justice/theodicy in the scenario are sublimated under a surface preoccupation with their affective import, but the process of sublimation is left sufficiently incomplete thus allowing a process of desublimation to take place. In *Ephraim Tristram Bates*, empathy is constructed as admirable but naïve and a clear index of social injustice. In *A Sentimental Journey*, it is constructed as a much more subtle psychological game — a game that looks suspiciously like a fetish and which suppresses theodictic questions about the ‘Deserver’ and ‘Undeserver’. The fact that it appears to be a psychological game demands a closer analysis of the affective dimension of the question.

Affective aspects of suffering and sentimentalism

In essence, holding fast in the depths of suffering to the theistic proposition that God is all-powerful and all-loving is an exercise in the management and interpretation of affect and, at a profound level, religious sentimentalism represents something of a revolution in that process. No such demand is made by sentimentalism. The emerging ideology of sentiment constructs the ideal person of sensibility as somebody who is gifted in their capacity for empathic responsiveness — a view which is quasi-religious in its tendency before one begins. It is not difficult to see that, in affective terms, the distinction between the stoical or rationalistic response to apparently undeserved suffering — within the context of Christian belief, that would consist of an obedient resignation combined with a trust in future rewards and punishments — and the sentimentalist response with its

tendency to luxuriate in empathy, constitutes a shift away from a conscious awareness of the injustice that produces the suffering towards a state of mind in which it becomes secondary.

In his response to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the influential Nonconformist preacher, Thomas Gibbons, wrote the following:

Whatever Providences befall us, whether private or personal, or national and public, let us not merely *feel* them, a Sensation common with Brutes themselves, but let us endeavour, as reasonable and intelligent Creatures, and more especially as Christians, to *improve* them, and examine what is the Intention of Providence in the light of Conscience and Scripture.⁵⁵

Gibbons is explicitly repudiating a nascent cultural tendency to identify the exercise of empathy alone as a virtuous act. When one contrasts such a mindset with that exemplified in Yorick's response to Maria, there is a vast ideological gulf between the two representations in the way each attributes significance to affect. In order to reveal the particular way in which Sterne's fiction nudges into the reader's awareness the fetishistic avoidance of inexplicable suffering in sentimentalism, it is necessary to outline its place within a conceptual pedigree. When one does this it quickly becomes apparent that something happens to the construction of sensibility between Cheyne's highly influential account of the nature of nervous disorders in the 1730s and later manifestations of the concept in the milieu of Sterne's fiction.⁵⁶ The most notable aspect of this is visible in the fact that the theodictic value that Cheyne puts on the sympathetic temperament becomes redundant in some of the manifestations of literary sentimentalism that owes a debt to the approach he developed.

⁵⁵ Thomas Gibbons, *A Sermon Preached at Haberdashers Hall, November 30th, On the Occasion of the Tremendous Earthquake at Lisbon, November 1, 1755*, 2nd edn (London: J. Buckland, 1756), p. 29.

⁵⁶ It is worth noting George Rousseau's coherent argument that Tristram notably fails to give an accurate account of any contemporaneous physiological theory with the implication that the claims that Tristram Shandy is part of normal sentimentalism are necessarily suspect (G.S. Rousseau, 'Science', in *The Context of English Literature: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Pat Rogers (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 153-207 (p. 195)).

Cheyne's account of nervous temperaments seems explicitly pious in a way that a representative sample of later, literary descriptions will rarely be:

It is a Misfortune indeed, to be born with weak Nerves, but if rightly us'd and manag'd, [...] it may be the Occasion of greater Felicity: For, at least, it is (or ought to be) a Fence and Security against the Snares and Temptations to which the Robust and Healthy are expos'd, and into which they seldom fail to run; [...] for all the innocent Enjoyments of Life, (at least, for Freedom from Pain and tormenting Distempers, for Chearfulness and freedom of Spirits, for intellectual Pleasures, mental Enjoyments, and Length of Days) they (considering the Temptations and Miseries of this mortal State) generally have, and may always have, the Advantage of these others. [...] As for intellectual Pleasures, the Case is without all doubt, [...] possibly, because the Organs of these Operations being in their own Nature delicate and fine [...] and thus communicated to their Posterity, these naturally subtil Parts thus become more fine and sensible [...]; at least the Case is generally in fact so, [...] Infinite Goodness and Power bringing Good out of innocent Evil.⁵⁷

Not only does this betray in its implicit view of the temptations of pleasure the outlook that also produces the fetish of continence, it expresses an assumption whose ideological decline in Western, eighteenth-century elite culture seems to confirm Neiman's hypothesis that the theodicean crisis is the product of optimism more than anything else.⁵⁸ In a manner that would have seemed normal in equivalent discourses over the preceding ten centuries, but might have seemed old fashioned to some readers forty years later, Cheyne characterises 'this mortal State' as being normally subject to 'Temptations and Miseries'. But, most significantly of all, his construction of the nervous temperament which, 'without all doubt' is capable of enjoying 'intellectual Pleasures' to a far greater extent than might be accessible to 'the Robust and Healthy', is posited as part of a providential compensation in which 'Infinite Goodness and Power [brings] Good out of innocent Evil'. His characterisation of God as 'Infinite Goodness and Power' is, of course, an underscoring of the qualities that are constructed as the contradiction that lies at the heart of the classical formulation of the Epicurean Paradox:

⁵⁷ George Cheyne, *The English Malady or A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds* (London and Bath: G. Strahan and J. Leake, 1733), pp. 20-21.

⁵⁸ Neiman, p. 246.

moral and natural evils exist either because the gods lack the power to prevent them or because they lack the goodness to prevent them.⁵⁹

Not only are later formulations commonly stripped of the theodictic context, the emotional responsiveness that is privileged in the emergent ideal visibly shifts away from its representation as a disposition given to ‘Chearfulness and freedom of Spirits’ towards the canonisation of sentimentalist melancholy. The reason for this is simple: the later norm for the nervous or sentimental disposition is largely validated by its awareness of — and response to — suffering. All of this suggests a fetishistic process in the mode defined by Žižek. A comparison of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* with *The Friends* (1754) by William Guthrie clearly demonstrates the fact that Sterne’s fiction seems to emerge at the very dawn of this process.

Brissenden succinctly draws attention to the affective intensification and rescription that literary sentimentalism underwent in Sterne’s milieu and, quite rightly, uses *The Friends* as a key datum in his argument:

To describe a novel as ‘sentimental’ [in the early development of the term] would have been to imply that it was a thoughtful, moral work, and one which presented human passion in a sober and realistic rather than a fancifully romantic manner. This is the sense of the word which William Guthrie [...] had in mind when, in 1754, he gave his novel *The Friends*, the sub-title: *A Sentimental History: Describing Love as a Virtue, As well as a Passion*. [...]. By comparison with the popular fiction produced twenty years later it is a most unsentimental work.⁶⁰

The choice of *The Friends* as a basis for this comparison is understandable enough and Brissenden’s account of it is equally fair. However, it does not perhaps give sufficient weight to the fact that all of the elements that characterise the later development of literary sentimentalism are clearly in place within the text but lacking the affective

⁵⁹ See Introduction above, p. 5, n. 11.

⁶⁰ Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, p. 101; p. 106.

ambiguities that are so central to sentimental representations in Sterne's fiction and which are suggestive of their fetishistic character.

Furthermore, despite its eponymous emphasis on love as a virtue, it also constructs the experience of suffering ('the Force of Affliction') as an agent of moral development:

[The young Charlotte, Mrs. Townley's daughter] had within her, unknown to herself, more noble Principles; but they had not been duly cultivated, and they lay concealed, till they unfolded into Action, when the Strength of Nature, and the Force of Affliction, purified and ennobled her Sentiments.⁶¹

It is important to remember here that this description of the young Charlotte is firmly set in the context of the development of her affections. Although notably less explicitly theistic than Cheyne's account of the distribution of goods between temperaments, this is wholly in accord with a pre-sentimentalist outlook and as an expression of a conventional, biblical rationale for suffering.⁶²

The comparison between Guthrie and Cheyne may be instructive. Despite the difference in the generic demands that shape *The Friends* and *The English Malady*, it is possible to argue that the shift away from a theistic underpinning of the construction of 'cultivated' natures with 'ennobled [...] Sentiments' is underway. Whether or not the sentimentally inclined reader is pious, *The Friends* allows for differing intensities of religious response. The fact that its representation of experience in general and suffering in particular can be read without much effort in orthodox terms — unlike

⁶¹ [William Guthrie], *The Friends: A Sentimental History Describing Love as a Virtue As Well As a Passion*, 2 vols (London: T. Waller, 1754), I, p. 47.

⁶² 'We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.' (Romans 5.3-5.)

representations of suffering and empathy in many later texts belonging to the mainstream of literary sentimentalism — is an extremely important datum. A comparison with *The Friends* exposes the extent to which later specimens of literary sentimentalism, if they retain a theistic reference to the meaning of suffering, tend to do so in more affective terms. In other words, there is an explicit shift away from an ethical evaluation of suffering (‘suffering ennobles the moral temperament’) towards its affective evaluation (‘sensitive natures feel pain more exquisitely’). What is fetishistically repressed in this transition is the metaphysical justification for suffering — the theodicy that constructs evil as an essential component in the process of soul-making and the precondition of goods that are unobtainable without it.

But *The Friends*, as an example of early literary sentimentalism, does not only reconstruct suffering as a catalyst for emotional development, it also reconstructs the contemplation of suffering in others as a potential index of providential intervention in the life of the subject:

There is in the human Breast a Master-key to human Passions, and the Hand of Heaven alone can touch it. *Charlotte* was insensible to Wit, to Learning, to Eloquence, and to Love; but she was conquer’d by Compassion [when it came to falling in love with Eugene].⁶³

Not only is the idea of undeserved suffering as a stimulus for providential intervention spectacularly absent in Sterne’s fiction, the contrast between this representation and the normal representation of libidinal economy in Sterne’s fiction is equally staggering. In *The Friends*, ‘compassion’ in this implicitly libidinal context is curiously de-eroticised by its positioning in a list of social and intellectual accomplishments — ‘Wit, [...] Learning [and], Eloquence’. The text goes on to qualify this in its representation of Charlotte’s romantic attachment to Eugene by arguing that ‘Religion’ can become ‘the Veil of

⁶³ *The Friends*, I, p. 78.

Inclination'.⁶⁴ However, whilst 'Inclination' here is also largely shorn of its libidinal undertones and seems to signify nothing more than the general tendency of subjects to follow preferences, such a qualification does not go so far as to dispel the attempt of the text either to reconstruct an alliance between religious orthodoxy and sentimental refinement or its use of this as a key test in its representation of the experience of suffering:

It would not have been in Humanity to have supported this Conflict of succeeding Passions [in Charlotte after the discovery of the identity of her father and that he was unjustly accused of murder and under sentence of death], this Violence of Distress, which touched every Spring of Life, and tore up every Fountain of Nature, had not *Charlotte* habitually, as it were, returned to the Thoughts of an Almighty Power, to whom nothing was impossible.⁶⁵

At the very least, this indicates that *The Friends* is constructed so as not to lose the pious and respectable part of its audience. More significantly, it constructs a psychic ideal that explicitly endorses the subjugation of affect in the face of suffering to 'higher', metaphysical considerations. If one were to contrast Charlotte's capacity for resignation to Toby's, what is revealed is the construction of Toby's temperament as the product of nature rather than the virtuous 'habit' that *The Friends* commends in Charlotte.

A simple comparison between the construction of virtue in distress in *The Friends* on the one hand and the fiction of Sterne on the other quickly reveals how the latter is constructing/revealing sentimentalism as a fetish in which the rationale for suffering is repressed by a reorientation of concern for the purely affective, uncultivated, and often libidinal dimension of empathy. However, the contemporaneous construction and representation of affect is not the only medium to reveal the semi-repressed nature of the theodictic dimension of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction: the debate about the vocabulary of sentiment is every bit as revealing.

⁶⁴ Ibid., I, p. 79.

⁶⁵ Ibid., I, p. 249.

Semantic and lexical evidence for sentimentalist fetishism

If the sentimentalist response to unjustifiable suffering has a fetishistic tendency — if it has an incompletely repressed ideological lie at its heart — it would not be strange to discover that its manifestation in lexical and semantic terms is troubled by some crucial ambiguities.⁶⁶ If one combines this with the fact that an important theme in the criticism of Sterne's fiction is the debate about its effect on the development of the denotation of 'sentimental', it quickly becomes clear that this aspect of the relationship between Sterne's fiction, sentimentalism, and the theodicy debate deserves closer attention.

In April 1768, within a few days of Sterne's death, the pious and theologically orthodox Elizabeth Carter wrote the following to her fellow intellectual, Elizabeth Vesey:

I neither have read [the fiction of Laurence Sterne] nor probably ever shall [...]. It is the fashion, I find, to extol him for benevolence, a word so wretchedly misapplied, and so often put as a substitute for virtue, that one is quite sick of hearing it repeated either by those who have no ideas at all, or by those who have none but such as confound all differences of right and wrong. Merely to be struck by a sudden impulse of compassion at the view of an object of distress, is no more benevolence than it is a fit of the gout, and indeed has a nearer relation to the last than the first.⁶⁷

The tantalisingly ambiguous use of the term 'benevolence' is the principal focus of interest here. Carter is using a word in a way that shows that its sentimental pedigree has not been clearly established — after all, given that it is derived from the Latin for 'good will', it seems to locate the virtue it describes, both conceptually and etymologically, in volition rather than affect or sensation. Carter's dismissal of Sterne's fiction on the grounds of its supposed confusion between 'compassion' and

⁶⁶ The lexical implications of certain key terms for sentimentalism have a considerable reach. Keymer argues that *Tristram Shandy* is a text that is knowingly aware of Locke's awareness of the fragility of language as an effective medium and that it is nevertheless a demonstration of something that goes further than Locke: it shows 'the impossibility of fixing the self [...] in language' and that it is also partly a melancholic expression of a sense of a lost past (Thomas Keymer, 'Dying by Numbers: *Tristram Shandy* and Serial Fiction (2)', *TShan*, 9(1997), 34-69 (pp. 36-37); *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*, p. 178).

⁶⁷ Quoted in Howes, p. 203.

‘benevolence’ is equally telling. This very fact alone may be one of the reasons why Carter thinks ‘benevolence’ is so ‘wretchedly misapplied’. It may also suggest that the sentimental status of Sterne’s fiction in its original milieu was not without complications. However, the manner in which Carter foregrounds ‘compassion at the view of an object of distress’ is good evidence that her circle has drawn attention to the representation of suffering as a key feature of the claims of Sterne’s fiction to literary, aesthetic, and moral value. Most tellingly of all, Carter’s awareness of the ethical slippage that sentimentalism was apparently causing between ‘compassion’ and ‘good will’ may be the product of an intuitive awareness of a fetishistic dimension of sentimentalist empathy.

Hindsight can be misleading: in this instance, it creates the danger of blinding critics of Sterne to key aspects of the relationship of his fiction to literary sentimentalism. It is highly likely that any assertion that Sterne’s fiction is decisively shaped by its relationship to the cult of sentiment is vulnerable to the danger of assuming that the generalisations about sentimentality that command contemporary critical recognition were little more than nascent in the 1750s and 60s. It is seductively easy to see Sterne’s fiction as something in dialogue with a literary sentimentalism that was developing around it and often in response to it. After all, Carter’s response to the reputation of Sterne’s fiction still carries a significant ring of a pre-sentimental outlook. Despite the title and tenor of *A Sentimental Journey*, it is easy to perpetrate an anachronism and take as read an established relationship between Sterne’s fiction and the sentimental mainstream that developed in its wake. It is therefore important to identify with some precision the ideological implications of sentimentalist terminology in the context of Sterne’s fiction.

Both New and Brissenden are alive to the fact that a lot of misattribution has attached itself to Sterne's use of the term, 'sentiment'.⁶⁸ New, perhaps, highlights this issue with the greatest clarity:

More than any other author of the eighteenth century, Sterne has been credited, accurately or not, with the introduction of the word *sentimental* into the English literary consciousness. Perhaps significantly, the first two occasions of its use in *TS*, here [57.3-7] and 327.4, are suggestive more of ironic bawdry than of sensibility, while the two remaining occurrences (710.8 and 746.6) are more in keeping with our usual notion of the word.⁶⁹

This is reinforced by the *OED* entry for the ninth denotation of 'sentiment' which cites a quotation from the opening of *A Sentimental Journey* as the first recorded instance of the term in the sense most commonly used in modern literary critical debate:⁷⁰

9. In generalized use. **a.** Refined and tender emotion; exercise or manifestation of 'sensibility'; emotional reflection or meditation; appeal to the tender emotions in literature or arts. Now chiefly in derisive use, conveying an imputation of either insincerity or mawkishness.
1768 *STERNE Sent. Journ.* I.3 'Tis the monarch [i.e. the King of France] of a people .. so renown'd for sentiment and fine feelings, that I have to reason with. **1784** *COWPER Tiroc.* 539 New-fangled sentiment, the boasted grace Of those who never feel in the right place.⁷¹

The appearance of 'insincerity' in the ninth denotation is notable. The imputation is, of course, the product of some hindsight and were it not for the evidence of Carter's response to Sterne's reputation, there could be some danger of anachronism in stamping this connotation onto the usage of the term in Sterne's fiction. But, at the very least, it is *prima facie* evidence of a semiotic disruption grounded on a subliminal awareness of ambiguity and hence of the fetishistic character of sentimentalist empathy. The second citation from Cowper conveniently seems to reinforce the apparently pioneering use of the term in Sterne and the fact that derision for sentimentality is not entirely new.

⁶⁸ Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, p. 187

⁶⁹ New, *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, pp. 91-92.

⁷⁰ *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 4.

⁷¹ *OED* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50219977>> [accessed 9 August 2007]

Yet, even within the Sterne corpus, the status of this quotation as the earliest printed instance of ‘sentiment’ in this sense is dubious and it would appear that Sterne uses the term in this and earlier instances in a way that suggests that he is far from the being the originator of the usage. Indeed, at the end of the entry for the ninth denotation of ‘sentiment’, the *OED* itself refers to an attribution of the use of the term in this sense to Chesterfield in 1747. With less reserve, the *OED* could have turned to an earlier use of ‘sentiment’ in Volume VIII of *Tristram Shandy*, first published in 1765 (three years before the example of earliest instance given by the *OED*) — one of the instances flagged by New. This instance involves the use of the term ‘sentimental’ in the sense suggested by the *OED* entry and, in confirmation of the main contention of this chapter, it is festooned with an ironic allusion to suffering:

My uncle Toby [...] took [the effect of Mrs. Wadman’s eye to make him fall in love] like a lamb — sat still and let the poison work in his veins without resistance — in the sharpest exacerbations of his wound (like that on his groin) he never dropt one fretful or discontented word — he blamed neither heaven nor earth [unlike Walter, who under similar circumstances fell to cursing] — or thought or spoke an injurious thing of any body, or any part of it; he sat solitary and pensive with his pipe — looking at his lame leg — then whiffing out a sentimental heigh ho! which mixing with the smoak, incommoded no one mortal.⁷²

As has been shown, New characterises the use of ‘sentiment’ elsewhere as savouring more of ‘ironic bawdry’ than ‘sensibility [...] more in keeping with our usual notion of the word’. However, the joke that depends on the use of the term as ‘ironic bawdry’ also depends on an awareness of a sense of ‘sentimental’, as here, that usually eschews the comically erotic. Even more pertinently, given that Toby ‘blamed neither heaven nor earth’, this instance of the use of the term is cast in explicitly, albeit jokingly theodictic terms.

⁷² *Tristram Shandy*, II, p. 710.

The implication of this instance of ‘sentimental’ should not be underestimated. *A Sentimental Journey*’s rhetorical construction of the eroticised sympathy for suffering as the basis for the Christian virtue of charity is prefigured and ironised in the description of Toby’s sentimental response to Widow Wadman’s supposed ailment. The libidinal economy assumed in this incident is regulated by a response to suffering, albeit of a trivial variety. Even more significantly, the incident is immediately juxtaposed with Toby’s response to the far more significant trauma of ‘the sharpest exacerbations of his wound’. The ironised confusion of libidinal attachment and the management of suffering is constructed in the passage in such a way as to suggest that Toby’s resigned response to trauma is idealised to an extent that pushes it (in Lacanian terms) into the realms of the imaginary rather than the symbolic: in so doing, libidinal attachment and sympathy neatly disguise an implicit disavowal. The ‘insincerity’ of ‘sentiment’ in its ninth denotation seems to be seminally present in this incident in a way that confirms its status as a fetish designed to avoid the contemplation of the unjustifiability of suffering: what makes it specifically fetishistic is the fact that the epithet is attached to Toby who is the archetype both of sincerity and of unselfconsciousness.

However, it is important not to be misled by anachronistically identifying sentimentalism solely with the emergence of the ninth denotation. If Sterne’s fiction is to an extent written by the market in which it emerges, then some attention must be paid to the hypothesis that *A Sentimental Journey* represents a response to the demand for the pathetic in *Tristram Shandy*.⁷³ Critical attention needs to be paid to other key,

⁷³ This well-established line of approach to *A Sentimental Journey* is neatly summarised by New in his Introduction to the Florida edition of the text. Ralph Griffiths in the *Monthly Review* of February 1765 had argued that ‘Mr. Shandy’ should ‘give up’ the bawdy and devote himself to his true ‘excellence’ which ‘lay in the pathetic’. As New argues, ‘Clearly, one approach to *A Sentimental Journey* is to consider it as Sterne’s final surrender to the program Griffiths outlines’ (New, ‘Introduction’ to *A Sentimental Journey*, p. xv).

sentimentalist passwords like ‘humanity’ and ‘sympathy’. Unsurprisingly, the instances of ‘humanity’ in *Tristram Shandy* are almost all focused on representations of the response to suffering and are distributed rather unevenly in the text — a fact which may be significant given the hypothesis that *A Sentimental Journey* represents a modification and justification of narrative technique in response to criticisms of *Tristram Shandy* for being indecent and the praise it won for its quality of sentiment. The term ‘humanity’ appears four times in the first two volumes of the text and five times in Volume IX: in other words, the volumes which achieved the greatest commercial success and the volume written with the most extensive experience of the critique of the series and the critical acclaim it received for its sentimental tendencies. What is more, one of the earliest sympathetic reviews of the opening volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, the review in the *London Magazine* of February 1760, focuses most particularly on the archetypal sentimental motif of the fiction: the incident with Uncle Toby and the fly.⁷⁴ For the sub-editor of *The London Magazine*, the most notable feature of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* is proclaimed in the header on the page on which one of the earliest reviews of the text appeared: ‘A fine LESSON of Universal Good-Will, &c’.⁷⁵ Carter’s concern about the rescription of ‘benevolence’ was presumably based on such uses of ‘Good-Will’.

The evidence that the last book of *Tristram Shandy* is shaped in response to these critical pressures should not be overlooked. At the heart of Volume IX is the following incident:

Now my uncle Toby [...] was counting over to himself upon his finger ends [...] all Mrs. Wadman’s perfections one by one [...].
 — She has a thousand virtues, Trim! said my uncle Toby —
 Am I to set them down, an’ please your honour? quoth the corporal.
 — [...] for of them all, Trim, that which wins me most, and which is a security for all the rest, is the compassionate turn and singular humanity of her character — I protest, added my uncle Toby, [that] was

⁷⁴ *Tristram Shandy*, 1, pp. 130-31.

⁷⁵ *The London Magazine or Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, 29 (1760), p. 112.

I her brother, Trim, a thousand fold, she could not make more constant or more tender enquiries after my sufferings — though now no more.

The Corporal made no reply to my uncle Toby's protestation, but by a short cough — he dipp'd the pen [...] into the inkhorn; and [...] wrote down the word

HUMANITY - - - thus.

Prithee, Corporal, said my uncle Toby, [...] — how often does Mrs. Bridget enquire after the wound on the cap of thy knee, which thou received'st at the battle of Landen?

She never, an' please your honour, enquires after it at all.

That, Corporal, said my uncle Toby, [...] shews the difference in the character of the mistress and maid — had the fortune of war allotted the same mischance to me, Mrs. Wadman would have enquired into every circumstance relating to it a hundred times — She would have enquired, an' please your honour, ten times as often about your honour's groin — The pain, Trim, is equally excruciating, — and Compassion has as much to do with the one as the other —

— God bless your honour! cried the Corporal — what has a woman's compassion to do with a wound upon the cap of a man's knee?⁷⁶

The whole drama of Toby's attachment to Widow Wadman is defined by his inability to detect the libidinal foundation of her concern for his wound and his rejection of the relationship once it has been unmasked: he is unwittingly clinging, under the signifiers of 'compassion' and 'humanity', to an object that contains *in toto* the disavowal of his ideological presuppositions. But to be aware that the use of term 'humanity' can be used as a feint for desire is still an incomplete account of the way that it operates in *Tristram Shandy*: the whole joke of the revelation of the exact spot where Toby was wounded involves the map of a battlefield not the 'raising and letting down [of] breeches' as Widow Wadman leads herself to expect.⁷⁷ The heart of the dysfunctional relationship between Widow Wadman and Toby lies in the trauma of a battlefield wound — that is the awareness that is being simultaneously sublimated and desublimated by the comedy that operates under the signs of terms like 'humanity' and 'sentiment'. The awareness of suffering is more repressed than the libidinal attachment in what otherwise seems to be a

⁷⁶ *Tristram Shandy*, II, pp. 801-2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 753.

cheeky, vaguely eroticised joke. Suffering and not desire is indicated as the repressed witness to a disavowed ideological lie.

Conclusions

The character of sentimentalist ideology in Sterne's fiction cannot be wholly explained without some reference to the problem of morally unjustifiable suffering. This process is visible in the ethical, theological, affective, and semantic manifestations of sentimentalism in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* and in them sentimentalist empathy is revealed as a fetishistic device for the avoidance of the theodicean question. At the core of the argument is the assertion that what makes this process both significant and fetishistic is the fact that it constantly positions suffering on the very margin of textual awareness: it sublimates issues relating to pain just enough for them to be overlooked by uncritical reading and simultaneously desublimates those issues just enough for them to indicate the potential presence (in Žižek's terms) of a disavowed ideological lie that structures the perception of reality implied by the sentimentalist tendencies in the text.

The ethical implications of literary sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction, by ironising and partially desublimating the libidinal undertone to sentimentalist compassion, also flags by its near absence the deeper question of the religious justifiability of suffering. This is reinforced by the fact that, at crucial moments, empathy is represented by emblems whose pathos seems to invite a purely synchronic interpretation — the reader is invited to luxuriate in the mere display of sentimentalist empathy — but which cannot wholly sublimate the wider question of how the emblematic moment comes to pass: it does not wholly repress the awareness of the fact that the suffering which is being contemplated has origins whose justifiability has not been interrogated.

With regard to the theological implications of literary sentimentalism as it manifests itself in Sterne's fiction, the texts partially reveal the deeply unresolved implications of the ethics of self-interest for religious commitment. Sterne's fiction rescripts sentimental compassion — almost directly in its intertextual relationship with *Ephraim Tristram Bates* — by shifting the debate about the 'deserving' poor into an apparently sectarian debate about Catholic monasticism but, in so doing, only partially represses the question of the justifiability of suffering in the context of poverty.

An analysis of the affective dimension of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction reveals that the construction of the empathic temperament in Sterne's milieu (as exemplified in the diverse works of Cheyne and Guthrie) is festooned with theodictic implications which are then subtly rescripted in Sterne's fiction. That process of rescription involves a shift away from a claim for the capacity for 'cheerfulness' in the empathic character as described by Cheyne and the virtue of stoicism which Guthrie's fiction idealises in the sentimental disposition towards — and compassion for — suffering whose affective value is deeply unresolved in Sterne's fiction and which is uniquely revealed in the reaction it provokes. In Sterne's fiction, as it represents the affective dimension of empathy, the nature of the appeal to the ideology of theism is deliberately ironised. There is an explicit shift away from an ethical evaluation of suffering ('suffering ennobles the moral temperament') towards its affective evaluation ('sensitive natures feel pain more exquisitely'). What is suppressed in this transition is the metaphysical justification for suffering — in this case the classical Irenaean theodicy that constructs evil as an essential component in the process of soul-making and the

precondition of goods that are unobtainable without it.⁷⁸ This act of suppression also indicates the fetishistic nature of the sentimentalist temperament as it is represented in Sterne's fiction.

In the analysis of the semantic and lexical evidence for sentimentalism's fetishistic disavowal of the problem of evil, the *OED*'s acknowledgement of 'insincerity' as a vital connotation of 'sentimental' is a key datum. This fact alone is *prima facie* evidence of a semiotic disruption grounded on a subliminal awareness of an ambiguity and hence of the fetish of sentimentalist empathy. A totemic use of the term 'sentimental' in *Tristram Shandy* — the point at which Toby falls in love with the Widow Wadman — is explicitly concerned not only with the sublimation of libidinal desire but also of the experience of trauma. Furthermore, the use of the term, with its ironised confusion of libidinal attachment and the management of suffering, is constructed in the passage in such a way as to suggest that Toby's resigned and accepting response to trauma is idealised to an extent that pushes it into the realms of the imaginary rather than the symbolic and in so doing, libidinal attachment and sympathy neatly disguise an implicit disavowal. Finally, the rhetorical thrust of Volume IX of *Tristram Shandy* focused on an ironic display of the semantic hinterland of the term 'humanity' in which the awareness of sublimated erotic desire was acknowledged but nevertheless superimposed on an equally sublimated awareness of the fact that sentimentalist use of the term

⁷⁸ Saint Irenaeus, the highly influential Christian bishop and theologian of the second century, famously sets out to justify the existence of evil by arguing that, 'man, a created being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God [by] making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. [It] was necessary that man should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover [from the disease of sin]; and having recovered, should be glorified; and having been glorified, should see his Lord' (Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', iv.xxxviii.3, in *ANF01: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* <<http://www.ccel.org>> [accessed 29 March 2010]).

constitutes an avoidance of the ideological contradictions implicit in the original, traumatic experience.

The awareness of suffering in the form that lies at the heart of the theodicy debate in the manifestations of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction is not placed clearly on the face of the texts. However its presence in the fringes of the text's awareness is widespread and, most crucially of all, is signalled as an ideological paradox whose ambiguities are less resolvable than the libidinal questions that normally accompany it. At one level, it could not be otherwise. After all, how could an ideology that seeks to found itself on the empathic response to virtue in distress ignore the question of the injustice implied by the distress of the virtuous? And yet that is precisely what it does and is thus, in the sense defined by Žižek, manifestly a fetish whose deepest disavowal is not the repression of libidinal forces, but the question of the metaphysical justifiability of suffering.

Conclusion

To reveal the theodictic undertones in Sterne's fiction is not to unearth a neatly sequenced argument but an array of data in parallel that emerge when viewed from different perspectives. The reason for this is simple: whilst the central issue of theodicy is fairly straightforward — the challenge to the idea of beneficent and omnipotent providence — its ramifications take on slightly discrete and disguised cultural and ideological forms. What is more, these forms become even more opaque in the contemporary setting because the way in which theodictic questions are currently posed has taken on a significantly different shape.¹ This is intensified by the fact that most of the theodictic elements in Sterne's fiction were never close to the front of its contemporaneous critical reception in an explicit form. There is a good reason for this: the anxieties that lie at the heart of the theodicy debate are perfectly suited to producing a fetishist disavowal. However, once this manoeuvre is identified, it becomes clear that Sterne's fiction cannot be fully accounted for without reference to theodicy.

Chapter 1 addressed the background to the paradox of treating a comic novel theodictically. There are readers who find *Tristram Shandy* to be endlessly funny. There were those who found *A Sentimental Journey* to be moving, moral, and incipiently revolutionary — and maybe such readers still exist. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that these were chief among the responses that the texts are putatively concerned to elicit and neither of them seems especially theodictic at first. Yet so much

¹ As a sample of this, one should note that the starting point of a fairly popular piece of modern theodicy, Gerald Priestland's, *The Case Against God*, starts with the theodictic implications of the Nazi policies of genocide (Gerald Priestland, *The Case Against God* (London: Collins, 1984), p. 13). Whereas the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 (a species of natural evil) was to play such an important role in eighteenth-century theodicy, modern theodicies frequently give as much — if not more — weight to the problem of moral evil.

of the humour of *Tristram Shandy* depends either on the persistent failure of the narrator to achieve some kind of ordered account of his life or it seems calculated to provoke disapproval from the ‘Prudes and Tartufs’ or, in the case of *A Sentimental Journey*, subtly to play with their anxieties.² When these facts are set next to the ideological importance in the milieu of belief in a rationally ordered and explicable universe and religious anxieties about the management of pleasure, their fundamentally theodictic nature starts to emerge. The relationship of Sterne’s fiction to the fetishes of order and continence is not tangential, it is direct and highly significant and it is theodictic.

Chapter 2 addressed a very common feature of fiction: its tendency to represent experiences that seem to be providentially addressed to their protagonists. For example, Robinson Crusoe defies parental advice and seems to suffer the divinely ordained consequences and Pamela, the model of modest chastity, is set in place to be bombarded by attempts to seduce her.³ So often, in fiction, the letter always arrives at its destination, and readers habitually assume that this is understood by an author who is apparently in sole control of the text’s meaning. At first sight, the same process seems to be at work in Sterne’s fiction: Tristram maps out his life in relation to the paternal, Shandean hypotheses and Yorick’s disposition renders him specially open to chance encounters that become the occasions for sentimental insight. And yet the ambiguity that surrounds these messages is not far from the surface in either fiction. What is more, in each case, the reader is never entirely sure that the author really does ‘know all’ in either fiction — the status of the author as the subject supposed to know is left undetermined. To

² *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 409.

³ ‘Never any young Adventurer’s Misfortunes, I believe, began sooner, or continued longer than mine. [...] I began now seriously to reflect upon what I had done, and how justly I was overtaken by the Judgment of Heaven for my wicked leaving my Father’s House, and abandoning all duty.’ (Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner*, ed. by J. Donald Crowley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 8.)

question the idea that events are in some sense *addressed* to their subjects and to question the idea that, somewhere, there is a total explanation are not simply matters for the poetics of fiction: in the eighteenth-century European context they are inalienably theodictic.

Chapter 3 examined one of the most critically noted features of Sterne's fiction: its narrative technique. There are good, theoretical reasons to assert with Morson and Strawson that the very act of constructing a narrative — of asserting that events are caused and successive — imports an epistemological assumption that often begs for a religious and theodictic explanation. Although it is far from being alone, few canonical fictions are as obsessed with narrativity as Sterne's. For Iser and Woolf, a key component of Sterne's fiction is its representation of being-in-the-midst — in other words, of being in a situation in which global explanations and justifications for what happens to subjects is pushed beyond the horizon. These approaches all produce results that are consistent with the idea that the narrators of Sterne's fiction — Tristram and Yorick — are incapable of fulfilling what Žižek calls their symbolic title-mandates as an empirical autobiographer and a clergyman commentator on experience respectively. The failure to act in accordance with those symbolic title-mandates points to those aspects of experience that do not fit the demands of the 'Master discourse' — and the remainder that keeps on eluding those demands is the need for an ordered and chaste account of experience. At the heart of the failing Master discourse is an apparently unfulfillable demand for an explicable universe.

Chapter 4 examined the much overlooked theodictic implications for the representation of mortality in Sterne's fiction. Death is almost a persona in both texts and mortality is not far from the surface of Sterne's fictions. *Tristram Shandy* in particular is concerned with the perpetuation of text in literary borrowing and transmission. The

idea that human language can have an undead quality that inhabits and transcends the speaker is a theme central in Sterne's fiction and its importance is highlighted by Žižek's approach to language. The idea of immortality is also a key component in theodictic discourse and texts emanating from Sterne's context which cast an ambiguity over its possibility need to be understood theodictically.

Chapter 5 focused on the fact that the representation of class hierarchy and identity has a theodictic dimension that is often anachronistically overlooked by contemporary criticism. Questions of social order were packed with theodictic significance in Sterne's context: belief in divine justice was an explicit, ideological fix for self-evidently inadequate systems of human justice. The political and social implications of Sterne's fiction are not hard to see — representations of class hierarchy and concerns with the nature of bourgeois identity are not far from the surface. *A Sentimental Journey* in particular is packed with political implications with its backdrop of travel through a country under a system of autocracy and aristocratic privilege. But the ambiguities do not stop there: the idea that a human social order as rationally transparent as the Newtonian cosmic order contains a veiled psychological threat is most usefully illuminated by Žižek's concept of the antirational resentment provoked by the very idea of rational order. Not only does this give a twist to the fetish of order, it raises a series of questions about the representation in Sterne's fiction of class hierarchy and of ethically inconsistent responses to suffering that are not merely political or psychological — they are theodictic.

Chapter 6 addressed the fact that no extensive account of Sterne's fiction can ignore its ambiguous and significant role in the cult of sensibility. At first sight, that ambiguity can be simply accounted for by its persistent and sexually transgressive undertones and its unresolved relationship to the debate about the ethical status of

self-interest. But this does not warrant its preoccupations with sentimental sympathy being overlooked — and sympathy is often focused on representations of suffering and its justifiability. Semantic shifts in the use of the term ‘sentimental’ also point to fetishistic aspects of the representation of suffering. This inevitably puts the sentimentalist dimension of Sterne’s fiction in relation to its theodictic context, especially if one remembers that its sexually transgressive subtext is partly shaped by the theodictic fetish of continence.

Sterne’s fiction in the light of its *impossible object*

Reading Sterne’s fiction as a fetishised response to suffering opens up a significant and underexamined dimension to the work. However, it has one final aspect that has a global significance for the fiction and confirms its playfully fetishistic quality. In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek sets out to define the transition from traditional to modern art by reference to what he calls *the impossible object*. He argues that, in traditional, representational paintings of the female body, there is an ‘ultimate object’:

never fully and directly shown, but always hinted at, present as a kind of underlying point of reference [and which] was, of course, the naked and thoroughly sexualized female body as the ultimate object of male desire and gaze. [It] is the impossible object which, precisely because it is unrepresentable [in traditional art], functions as the ultimate horizon of representation whose disclosure is forever postponed [...]. Its absence, the Void of the Thing, is then filled in by ‘sublimated’ images of the beautiful but not totally exposed female bodies [...]. But the crucial point (or rather the underlying illusion) of traditional painting is that the ‘true’ incestuous naked body is nonetheless waiting there to be discovered — in short, the illusion of traditional realism does not lie in the faithful rendering of the depicted objects; rather, it lies in the belief that *behind* the directly rendered objects *is* the absolute Thing which could be possessed if only we were able to discard the obstacles or prohibitions that prevent access to it.⁴

Tristram Shandy is a literary representation of a number of objects which are ‘forever postponed’. Without much effort, it is possible to generate a simple inventory of the

⁴ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, pp. 32-33.

objects whose ‘disclosure’ is endlessly withheld. At the most explicit level, there are all of the promised chapters which never materialise. At the typographical level, there are the utterances that are supposed to underlie the gaps and asterisks. At the ethical level, there are the seemingly innumerable and teasing hints at the unmentionable and libidinal implications of the text — it constantly plays with the reader’s awareness of ‘obstacles’ and ‘prohibitions’ that delimit what can safely be published above the water line that marks the boundary between polite and thoroughly transgressive literature. Above all, at the narratological level, there is the endless failure to produce something resembling a plot. *A Sentimental Journey* is not without its postponements either in its sequence of flirtations that never resolve into sexual consummation and its acts of empathy which always leave a remainder of ethical ambiguity.

The fact that Sterne’s fiction plays so knowingly with the impossible object of narrative may be, in Žižek’s terms, precisely the quality that makes it so transitional for literary criticism — the last gasp of Early Modern humanist learned wit and the first expression of modernist and postmodern indeterminacy. For Žižek, it is Courbet’s unashamedly sexualised and graphic depiction of a naked female torso in *L’Origine du Monde* (1866) — the ‘radical *desublimation*’ of the impossible object — that announces the death of traditional, representational painting.⁵ In doing this, it exposes the fact that ‘there is no Thing behind [the] sublime appearance’.⁶ All that is left for modern art is to start up a new ‘matrix of sublimation’ by staging ‘*the Void itself*’. For Žižek, this is what explains the fascination of the minimalist, abstract, and non-representational painting of such artists as Malevich and Rothko. In narratological terms, with its hints at the tendency of readers to mistake stories for reality, the material object of the book for its

⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

author and what it represents, and, above all, in the fascination with the idea that life can be rendered as a plot, there is the possibility that Sterne's fiction is presciently aware of the possibility that, behind representational fiction, there is a void.

There is not much debate about the fact that *Tristram Shandy* endlessly postpones — although the claim that its postponements are in the mode of Žižek's concept of the impossible object may be more contestable. It may also be the case that its signals of the possibility that there might be a void within literary representation made Sterne's fiction specially unpalatable to Leavis thus provoking the anathema of 'nasty and irresponsible trifling'.⁷ After all, what other alternative was there for a theory that accorded an *ersatz* religious value to literary production and consumption?⁸ For all this, Žižek's concept of the impossible object promises to be yet another fruitful approach to the analysis of Sterne's fiction although, at first sight, it seems to be fatal to the claim that the theodictic undertones in the text are anything more than marginal. The reason for this is simple: Žižek describes the impossible object in strictly libidinal terms and it most obviously fits the sexually transgressive aspects of the texts. But this is not the case.

Undoubtedly, one of the impossible objects behind Sterne's fiction is uninhibited libido itself, but it is far from being the only dimension of the 'ultimate horizon of representation whose disclosure is forever postponed' as even a naïve reading can discover. The reader is obliged, at the end of *Tristram Shandy*, to put down the book and rest content with the fact that she has not been granted any kind of ultimate explanation — no final vindication or refutation of the Shandean hypotheses, no coherent

⁷ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972; repr. 1974), p. 10.

⁸ As Leavis himself wrote about the foundational assumptions on which *Scrutiny* was founded, 'Literature [...] mattered; it mattered crucially to civilization — of that we were sure. It mattered because it represented a human reality, an autonomy of the human spirit, for which economic determinism and reductive interpretation in terms of the Class War left no room' (F.R. Leavis, '“Scrutiny”: A Retrospect', *Scrutiny* 20 (1963), 1-26 (p. 4)).

representation of Tristram or his opinions, and no resolution of the encounters in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* that never gets to Italy. Above all, it absolutely refuses to fulfil one of the first promises that it makes: to let the reader ‘into the whole secret from first to last, of everything that concerns’ the subject of the fiction.⁹ This is not merely a teasing allusion to an unannounced, voyeuristic impulse that may structure the reader’s approach, it is also the refusal of the simple and very strong demand for a plot from which a neatly causal story can be extracted. The psychologically urgent demand for explicit and understandable causality is, more than anything else, a demand that suffering be provided with an explanation — the engine that normally drives conventional, fictional narrative is the creation of tension in which a significant object is put into jeopardy. This dimension of plot is implicitly akin to the procedures of theodicy and it is a highly significant feature of Sterne’s fiction that has never hitherto been adequately described.

⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, p. 5.

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